
Little White Lies
by Sara Ackerman

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Smashwords Edition

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Cover art by Kathy King.

Prologue

EVIE! Do hush up!" Beatrice Westby, age ten, impatiently huffed at her screaming younger sister. Then stomped her foot in the soft hay of the horse barn just for good measure. "I am trying to think!" Her soft blond curls riotously bounced up and down and slapped against her rosy cheeks, seeming to echo the irritated frustration that Beatrice felt. With blue eyes flashing, she turned and stared at Evie until her youngest sister of five years stuffed her thumb in her mouth and began to quietly whimper instead.

Amelia, the next oldest sister at age eight, walked to Evie and placed a comforting arm around her tiny shoulders. The two sank onto a pile of hay, Evie's soft, blonde head resting on Amelia's shoulder. Then Amelia turned her worried green eyes to Beatrice. "What are we going to do? Papa will whip us for sure if he finds out what we did." Amelia's lower lip started to tremble at the thought of a whipping from her father. Her voice wavered slightly as she added, "And mama will be ever so disappointed."

Evie nodded mournfully as fresh tears fell down her chubby face. "Disappointed," she echoed.

Amelia patted Evie's shoulder and looked trustingly at Beatrice. She knew that Beatrice would think of something. She was the eldest and she always had good ideas. Amelia frowned. Then worried her lower lip with her teeth. Except for today's good idea. That hadn't been such a good idea at all.

They knew that they were not to go anywhere near father's horse, Thunder. He was not like Bluebell, Beatrice's horse, or even Katy, her gentle dappled pony. Thunder was a thoroughbred, and that meant he was not to be touched. Papa had been very stern when he told the girls to stay away from him. But today, they had disobeyed papa and Thunder got out. Amelia sniffled as tears welled in her eyes. He was going to be very angry.

Amelia and Evie sat patiently on the hay while they watched Beatrice pace around the barn. From time to time, she muttered to herself. Once she looked like she was going to cry, but then she moved to Bluebell's stall and hid her face in her horse's neck.

She shifted uncomfortably. The hay was scratchy and Evie's head was heavy on her shoulder. Amelia was just about ready to ask Beatrice what she had come up with when she heard voices approaching the barn. They couldn't be caught! They weren't supposed to be in the barn without someone watching them.

Grabbing Evie by the arm, Amelia pulled her behind the hay bale they had been sitting on. "Hsst! Beatrice! Someone's coming!"

Beatrice's head popped up from her horse's neck and her eyes widened in fright. She searched frantically for a place to hide before quickly scrambling over Bluebell's stall door. Amelia peeked over the hay pile and watched Beatrice's skirts disappear as James and Tuck, two of papa's grooms, walked into the barn. Then she ducked down again, pulling Evie closely to her side.

"It's the darndest thing," Tuck said to James. "It looked like Thunder galloping across the fields. But I know he was locked up inside his stall."

Amelia heard James, the head groom, swear loudly. "You'd just better hope it only looked like Thunder and it wasn't actually him. Otherwise, his Lordship will have both of our skins. And I for one like mine just where it is."

The footsteps faded, and Amelia guessed they must be walking down the barn towards Thunder's stall. Eventually, the footsteps stopped. "Damn it all!" James cried. "It was Thunder. I don't know how he got out, but you had best make sure he gets back in here before his Lordship comes down this afternoon."

"Yes sir," Tuck stammered. "I'll ride out right now." Amelia could hear hurried footsteps coming closer to her hiding spot.

James continued muttering to himself as he stomped after Tuck. "It must be those damned Gypsies his Lordship allows to camp in the East forest. I've seen them sniffing around the barn in the past. Thunder must have been too great a temptation for them thieves to stay away this time."

Eventually, James and Tuck could be heard saddling and mounting their horses. Amelia finally heard them leave the barn in obvious quick pursuit of Thunder. After several minutes of silence, the stall door squeaked open and soon, Beatrice's face peeked over the hay pile where she and Evie were still pressed together.

Evie and Amelia climbed out from behind the hay pile and brushed off their skirts. Amelia picked straw out of her red braids and asked worriedly, "What are we going to do, Bea? James and Tuck know Thunder's gone. They're going to tell papa. And papa is going to know it was us who let him out because we were down here for our afternoon ride."

"But don't you see?" Bea said excitedly. "Now we have someone to blame it on."

Amelia was confused. She didn't see who they could blame but themselves.

"The Gypsies. You heard James say that they Gypsies are here again. We just tell papa that we saw the Gypsies let Thunder out and take him away," she finished proudly.

"But that's lying!" Amelia gasped.

Evie nodded in agreement.

"And papa and mama say that it's wrong to tell a lie." Amelia gripped her hands and stared at her older sister in anguish.

Beatrice walked to where Amelia and Evie were standing and looked down at both of them. "They also said that sometimes we can lie if we are doing it to protect someone so they don't get hurt." Beatrice looked smug.

“And we’re doing so we don’t get hurt.” Bea knelt in front of Evie and grabbed her small hands, her voice soft and pleading. “You don’t want to get hurt, do you Evie? You don’t want papa to whip you, do you?”

Evie emphatically shook her head no, her little eyes filling with tears again.

Amelia shook her head slowly. “I don’t think that’s what they meant, Bea. It's not right. The Gypsies could get in trouble and they didn’t do anything.”

Beatrice waved her hand dismissively in the air. “You know they never stay very long. They should be leaving soon, anyway, and they won’t be back for years. No one will get hurt.”

“I don’t want to get paddled, Mimi,” Evie snuffled forlornly.

Sighing loudly, Amelia knew she was outnumbered. When Evie teamed up with Bea, she knew there was no way she was going to get around them. Even though she knew it was wrong, Amelia found herself reluctantly agreeing to her sister’s scheme. After all, Bea is the one who got them in to this mess. She could get them out of it, she reasoned.

“You promise, Bea?” Amelia asked worriedly. “No one is going to get hurt?”

Bea sighed in obvious relief. “I promise. Now, here’s the plan.” The girls huddled together while Beatrice explained what each of them was going to do.

A half hour later, the girls ran back to the house from the barn and found their father working in his study. “Papa, papa,” they yelled, “Thunder got out!”

Her father looked up from the papers he was studying, “Slow down girls. What happened?” He moved out from behind his desk to stand in front of them, his hands clasped behind his back.

Breathlessly, Beatrice explained, “We were playing out by the barn and we say a Gypsy by the doors of the barn. And then Thunder neighed really loud. And then we saw him running across the field. And we thought we saw someone riding him.” Beatrice paused for a breath. “Probably the Gypsy we saw.”

Her father arched an eyebrow and pursed his lips as though he were in deep concentration. “These are very serious allegations, Beatrice.” He placed his hands on his hips while he resumed his pacing. Then stopped again in front of his girls. “You say that all three of you saw this?” He bent down and peered down into Amelia and Evie’s eyes.

Amelia felt like her father’s eyes could see inside her to the truth of what she and her sisters had done, but she pushed down the rising panic, swallowed and forced her gaze to her father’s eyes anyway. “Yes, father,” she whispered, then quickly dropped her eyes again to avoid her father’s knowing

gaze.

He looked to Evie, who immediately stuffed her thumb back into her mouth and nodded.

After intently studying all three sisters once more, he shook his head sadly, then slowly straightened to his full height once more. “Well, if what you say is the truth, then this is a very serious problem indeed.” Walking back to his desk, he sat down and sighed heavily. “Thank you, ladies, for telling the truth. I will see that this problem is taken care of.” He smiled sadly at them, and waving his hands shooed the girls from his study.

The girls hurried upstairs to the nursery, grateful to have escaped their father’s study unscathed. Once safely inside, nurse took Evie to her cot for a nap. Amelia, tired, too, from the day’s events crawled into her bed, pulled her covers up to her chin, and curled up onto her side. Beatrice plopped down on the bed next to Amelia.

“See,” she gloated to Amelia’s back, “I told you papa would believe us.” Amelia, sick with guilt from the lie scrunched her eyes shut and pretended to be a sleep. Beatrice yawned hugely and snuggled up behind her sister. Murmuring sleepily to Amelia she threw her arm around her sister’s body and hugged her close. “There’s nothing to worry about, Mimi. Everything is going to be fine. You’ll see.”

Snuggled warmly against her sister safe in her bed, Amelia felt icy cold fingers of dread tickle up her spine. She shivered and pulled her covers higher around her ears. Despite Beatrice’s reassuring words, somehow, Amelia didn’t think that everything was going to be fine.

ONE week later, Amelia and her sisters were playing outside in the fields near the edge of the forest. They had been playing hide and seek, and Amelia had been it for the last quarter of an hour. She hated being it because she could never find anyone, so she was always the seeker, never the hider. After wandering aimlessly for the last five minutes or so, she was too tired to continue searching. Instead, she plopped down by a fallen log and leaned her head back. She sighed and closed her eyes.

The sun that had been warming her face while she rested by the log suddenly disappeared. Amelia cracked her eyes open and saw a large shadow looming over her. Two bony, wrinkly hands reached down and grabbed her by the shoulders. Amelia opened her mouth and screamed at the top of her lungs.

“Well, well,” said the shadow in a horrible, crackling voice that sent shivers down Amelia’s spine. “If it isn’t one of the little liars.” The shadow moved around the log, and Amelia could see that the shadow was actually an old woman dressed in Gypsy clothes.

Amelia shrank against the log. “You’re supposed to be gone!” she stammered. “My papa told you to leave a week ago.”

She cackled and rubbed her hands together. “So you know who I am. That’ll save us some time.”

"What do you want with me?"

"Not just you, little girl. I also want your sisters, too." The old woman smiled with apparent delight, her gap-toothed smile sending shivers of dread down Amelia's spine.

"They're...they're not here," she managed to squeak out through the lump of fear that had lodged in her throat.

"Oh, but they'll come," she cackled. "I saw them hiding not too far away from here. I imagine they are on their way now after hearing you scream."

A loud cracking of branches and underbrush coming from the forest behind Amelia alerted her to the truth of the old woman's statement. Soon, her two sisters emerged from the forest and ran to where Amelia sat on the log, Beatrice yelling at the top of her lungs, "Amelia! We're coming!"

Spying the old woman, they skidded to a halt and looked frantically from Amelia to the old woman. Evie ran to huddle beside Amelia while Beatrice, ever the eldest, stood protectively in front of her sisters and drawing herself up to her full height, demanded imperiously, "Who are you and what do you want with my sister?"

Amelia admired her sister's bravado because she could see what it was costing her. Her hands clutched her skirts in a white-knuckled death grip and her face quickly lost its normal rosy glow. Evie began to cry, her hot tears leaking through the muslin of Amelia's dress dampening her skin.

The old hag smiled menacingly at the sisters' discomfort. "I'm just an old woman passing through the forest."

Beatrice assessed the old woman knowingly, taking in her faded garments and weathered face. "You're a Gypsy!" Beatrice grit out. With her chin held high, she waved her hand in the air in a blatant act of dismissal. "Be gone! My father has evicted you and your kind for your treachery against his hospitality!"

"Our treachery, Lady Beatrice?" The old woman whispered, venom lacing her every word. Slowly she advanced on the girls, pinning them against the fallen log. Soon, her wrinkled face was looming over Beatrice's, her eyes dark and angry. "Don't you mean yours?" she spit.

"H-how do you know my name?" Beatrice stammered, her eyes darting wildly from the old woman to her sisters behind her. Having reached the end of her courage, she held out her hand to Amelia and grasped it in her own. Amelia pulled Beatrice down with a plunk to sit beside her near the fallen log, and then whimpered in her older sister's ear, "I knew we wouldn't get away with it, Bea. I just knew it!"

Rubbing her hands together in apparent glee, the old woman began to pace in front of where the girls were sitting. "Oh, I know all about you, Lady Beatrice and your sisters, too. I also know what you did last week and I intend to make it right."

All three girls began to tremble, the tears flowing freely from down their stricken faces.

"What are you going to do to us?" Amelia cried to the hunched figure of the pacing Gyps, but all she heard was the cackling laughter of the old woman.

All at once everything became deathly still. The bird song quieted and the gentle wind that had been rustling the leaves and feathering the grass ceased. A large cloud obscured the light from the sun darkening the once brightly lit clearing and plunged the girls into shadow. And finally, worst of all, the old gypsy woman raised her arms, and with head thrown back, she began to chant.

"For this terrible deed you did, an innocent man was tried and found guilty of a crime he did not commit." At this point, the once dormant wind began to rise and whip around the clearing. Amelia watched in equal parts dread and amazement as the sky darkened and the wind slashed her hair harshly against her face.

"It was you!" she screeched. The old woman was in a frenzy now. Her voice had reached a fever pitch of excitement and energy and it was all directed at the three pitiful creatures that were huddled before her.

Her head snapped forward and then rolled from side to side as though some other terrible force controlled her movements. The girls whimpered loudly now, too afraid to hold back their terror. With fiercely glowing eyes and outstretched arms her body tautened and she screamed over the now howling winds. "It was you that were too weak to tell the truth, and have thus forever condemned an innocent to life far from his family!"

Then, the old woman's arms dropped. Her eyes no longer held the fierce fire of revenge, and without that fierce light, the winds died once more. She pointed a gnarled finger at the three sisters, and in a voice deadlier than the grave, she commanded, "I curse you."

She pointed that bony finger of dread at Evie first, then at Beatrice and then finally at Amelia.

You who knew it was wrong to tell a lie

Against one who had not wronged you.

Forever forced to tell the truth until you die.

From this day on, Amelia, you will never again be untrue.

Thus having delivered her final curse, the old Gypsy woman whispered under her breath, "So be it." Then she vanished through the woods and out of sight. Never to be seen again.

Chapter 1

London

12 years later

Lady Amelia Westby lounged in the corner of her parent's ballroom idly taking in the glittering opulence of a London ball. The elite of the ton twirled and sparkled in their elaborate finery as they spun around the tastefully decorated ballroom for her youngest sister's come-out ball. She could see Evie demurely dressed in her debutante white dancing with the eldest son of the Earl of Markham, Lord Alex Newgate, her newly betrothed.

He was besotted with Evie. And who could blame him? Amelia thought. Evie looked like an angel tonight, her white-blonde hair piled high on top of her head, several curls trailing sweetly down the slope of her elegant neck. Sparkling blue eyes framed by long, blonde lashes regarded her partner shyly while a faint pink hue dusted her high cheekbones.

Ever since Evie had turned fifteen, men young and old had been entranced with her beauty and her sweetness. Father practically had to beat them off with a stick, which was a relief to everyone in the family since they had all thought that Evie's lack of speech would drive away any potential suitors. Perversely, it only made them more eager. Eager to bask in her sweet, shy presence. Eager to be the one to break the spell that kept her sister silent, so to speak.

Amelia smiled wryly and snorted indelicately, then quickly raised her fan to cover her mouth in case anyone had heard. If they only knew the truth about Evie, she thought.

A sudden swishing of pink skirts caught Amelia's attention. Looking up, she spied her good friend, Lady Clarisse Thornston swiftly approaching her corner of the room. Her brown curls bounced comically up and down on her round, rosy cheeks. Though short in stature, Clarisse managed to maneuver her plump frame swiftly through the crush of bodies to where Amelia sat in the corner. Soon, her friend was settled on the settee next to Amelia. Lady Clarisse smoothed out her skirts and gave her friend a shrewd look, "What do you think of my gown?"

Fluttering her fan unhurriedly in front of her face, Amelia sighed. Though she knew her response wouldn't upset her friend, she still disliked not being able to compliment her. "That dress is hideous, Clary. Pink is not your color."

Un-offended by Amelia's frank appraisal, Clarisse touched the drooping feathers nestled in her curly hair and slightly adjusted them. "Humph. That's what I thought, too, but mama insisted I wear it tonight." Clarisse squinted her eyes and glared off into the far corners of the ballroom. From her expression, Amelia assumed Lady Thornston must be stationed over there gossiping with the other matrons.

"Any particular reason why?" Amelia queried languidly.

Clarisse waved her hands dismissively in the air. “Oh, to impress some rich, aging gentleman with poor eyesight, I imagine. My mother always has some scheme that involves me dressing up in hideous garments to impress gentlemen old enough to be my father.” Here, Clarisse shuddered. “As if I’d marry someone who had the notion that pink was a fashionable color on a young woman.” She was silent several seconds, presumably contemplating her narrow escape from less than wedded bliss. Then, she noticeably brightened.

“So, what have I missed?” Clarisse looked eagerly around the ballroom. “I can see that most of the ton is here tonight for your sister’s come-out.”

Amelia smothered an amused smile. It always amazed her how swiftly Clarisse’s moods changed. Naturally light-hearted, she could never stay irritated long, and tonight was proving no differently. Amelia envied her friend’s ability to remain cheery in spite of provocation, and often wished she had that ability as well. Ever since they were children, Clarisse had been the bright, cheery one whereas Amelia had always been a little more cautious, a little more serious.

Lady Amelia Westby and Lady Clarisse Thornston had become the best of friends on that fateful day in the clearing by the east woods some twelve years previous. The sisters had stayed in the clearing long after the Gypsy woman had left deciding what they were to do. But Beatrice was out of ideas, too shaken from their encounter with the Gypsy woman to think clearly and Amelia and Evie too numb to be of much use. Eventually the three sisters trudged back to the house only to be greeted by their frantic nurse, Miss Johnson, who had been worriedly looking for them for the better part of an hour.

The children received a sound scolding from nurse, who quickly repaired the children’s costumes and then ushered the two eldest into the sitting room where their mother had been waiting for them for tea. If nurse wondered at their listless demeanor, she was too harried to pay too much attention.

“Beatrice, Amelia,“ their mother greeted them solicitously, “You remember Lady Thornston and her daughters Lady Gertrude and Lady Clarisse?” Amelia and Beatrice murmured subdued greetings, then sat down near the other two young ladies. Soon the adults began speaking, and Lady Gertrude had engaged a reluctant Lady Beatrice in conversation. Amelia stared off into space until she received a sharp poke on the arm. Startled, she looked over into the round face and assessing eyes of Lady Clarisse Thornston, age eight.

“What do you think of my dress?” she asked.

Little Amelia almost cried. Every time Lady Clarisse came to tea, she asked the same question about her dress. In the past, she had always politely smiled and complimented her even though she had always secretly thought that her dresses were horribly ugly. Today was no different and no matter how hard Amelia tried to smile and politely compliment her, she could not.

"It's, ah, it's um, very, ah…" Amelia tried and tried but the words just wouldn't leave her mouth. Her mama had said that it was acceptable on occasion to tell a little white lie to spare someone's feelings. Just the thought of telling a lie, though, made her tummy feel sick and her mouth dry out.

Clarisse poked her again. "Well?" she demanded.

Amelia felt dizzy and wanted to lie down. Oh, how she hated this little girl in her ugly dress. And then, just like that, the lie she had told countless times in the past died in her throat. Strangled by the Gypsy curse she supposed. Instead, much to her horror, she heard herself saying, "That is the most ugliest dress I have ever seen in my life!"

Next to her, Clarisse's eyes widened in shock and her mouth made a little funny 'o.' Gertrude and Beatrice had stopped talking and just stared at Amelia, like she had grown horns of a sudden. Amelia's mother having heard as well exclaimed in shock, "Amelia Jane Westby! Apologize this instant!"

Amelia's eyes burned in shame. Then, she ran from the room and down the hallway. Huddled under the stairs with her arms wrapped around her knees and her head buried in her arms, Amelia let the tears flow. How long she sat there in her misery, she did not know. All she knew was that soon she was joined by another person. Then she felt a sharp poke. And heard a vexing voice close to her ear. "Why'd you say that about my dress?"

"It was the truth," Amelia snuffled from the harbor of her arms.

"But you've never said anything about my other dresses and they were also really ugly." Clarisse wrinkled her nose in disgust. Then poked Amelia again, so she'd look up.

Amelia bristled with anger. Her head snapped up and with green eyes flashing, she glared at Clarisse. After all she had been through today this was just too much! First getting cursed by a Gypsy and then being hounded by this tiresome girl. Really! "That's because I was telling a lie so you wouldn't get your feelings hurt, you silly girl."

"Why'd you tell the truth now?" Clarisse's big brown eyes regarded Amelia curiously, and soon, the trials of the last week were just too much for one little girl to bear. She found herself telling Clarisse everything that had happened since that day in the barn. At the end of Amelia's story, culminating with the horrible Gypsy curse from a few hours ago, Clarisse gave her one, long assessing look and announced with all the authority of an eight year old, 'I like you, Amelia Jane Westby. You and I are going to be the best of friends. I just know it."

And from that day on they had been.

"YOHOO! Amelia" Amelia snapped back to the present with a start. Clarisse was waving her hands in front of her face, and from the look on Clarisse's face Amelia had been lost in thought for quite some time.

"Hmmm?" Amelia glanced around the ballroom and found her sister dancing in the crowd and nodded. "The ball? Yes, it's quite a crush tonight.

Mother is positively ecstatic."

"Evie is as beautiful as ever." Clarisse sighed wistfully as she caught sight of Evie twirling on the dance floor.

"She is, isn't she?" Amelia grew thoughtful, her head canted to one side, eyebrows squeezed in concentration. "As much as I love my sister, I still can't help feeling sorry for her poor betrothed, the unlucky dope." She shook her head. Then grinned widely, "Wait until he finds out what she's really like." Amelia snickered indelicately behind her fan.

Clarisse's eyebrows rose over mischievously twinkling brown eyes as she smothered a mirthful chuckle. "Oh, Amelia, are we starting early tonight?"

Startled, Amelia's green eyes met her friend's laughing ones. She gave a half-hearted chuckle. "Maybe so. This evening was rather dull until you showed."

"No one asked you to dance?"

Amelia made a face. "Only Jeremy." Usually her father had to bribe men to dance with her. She wondered what he had promised Jeremy for this evening's dance.

"Ugh," Clarisse wrinkled her nose in disgust. "I thought he had taken his own residence after returning from the Continent."

"Unfortunately not," Amelia sighed thinking about Jeremy Michelson, their father's protégé and son of father's oldest friend and former shipping merchant, Henry Michelson. After the unexpected death of Jeremy's father when he was declared lost at sea after one of his vessels that he was aboard sank off the coast of France several years ago, father had taken a keen interest in Jeremy's future and treated him like the son he never had, much to the annoyance of the three sisters. He was constantly underfoot and in their business. Had he been pleasant to be around, Amelia could have seen them becoming fond of Jeremy, but as it was, he had a foul disposition and enjoyed tormenting her and her sisters any chance he could. Yet, father still favored him.

"Father dotes on him and is desperately trying to make Jeremy his heir. He says that it will go better for Jeremy if he lives with us."

"Is that even possible?" Clarisse asked cocking her pretty head in thought.

Amelia shrugged dismissively. "It's not as if any of us girls can inherit, and barring the sudden discovery of any other male relatives, the title and all the land will revert back to the crown. Father is grasping at straws if you ask me. I don't see how he can claim Jeremy as his heir "

"He could always marry you or one of your sisters, couldn't he? When you had children, they would inherit, so technically, Jeremy would until the children came of age."

Taking her fan in hand, Amelia lightly tapped her friend on the arm. “Bite your tongue, Clarisse! As if anyone of us wants to be tied down to that man, let alone bear his children!”

Clarisse spied Jeremy across the room and said contemplatively, “I don’t know. He’s rather handsome. A woman could get used to taking her morning tea across from such a pretty face.”

“He’s handsome to be sure, but he has a nasty temper. I’ve seen him scream at the servants over the littlest things.” Amelia shuddered. “And I’ve told you before how he enjoys tormenting us. He always tries to use our curses against us. Mostly me and Evie. I think he’s too scared of Bea. Though, really, what man isn’t?” She, too, regarded Jeremy where he stood like a sentry at the entrance to the terrace and shook her head emphatically. “No, Clarisse, I don’t care how handsome a man is. If he cannot treat people with respect, he is not worth of a lady’s hand in marriage, either. I’d rather an ugly man who was kind than a handsome one who was not.”

“Or a handsome one that was kind, too. Wouldn’t that be ideal?” Clarisse asked wistfully.

“True. Though after several years of being out, Clarisse, I’m beginning to doubt that such a man even exists.” Both ladies sighed in unison, and Amelia had the misfortune to be caught mooning by the ever present Jeremy, who immediately straightened and eyed Amelia with keen interest. Far from eager to repeat the awkward dance from an hour ago, Amelia quickly averted her gaze so Jeremy would take the hint and leave her be. *Like all the other men of the ton,* Amelia thought bitterly.

Since her come-out three years ago, Amelia could count on one hand the number of times that a gentleman had asked her to dance. After her first season, she had alienated most of the eligible bachelors and their managing mamas. It wasn’t her fault that her responses to questions posed while dancing had been bluntly honest. “No, Lord Mosby, I do not enjoy dancing in general.” “Yes, Lord Mathews, you do dance rather clumsily and have mangled my toes quite badly.” Most gentlemen became flustered and even a trifle annoyed when given a direct and honest answer. Soon, word got around that Lady Amelia was odd. Rude even, and the number of gentlemen who asked her to dance dwindled until she no longer had any partners at all.

“Let’s play, Mimi!” At Amelia’s obvious reluctant expression, Clarisse whispered into her ear, “If you play, I’ll tell you some gossip I overheard about Evie’s betrothed.” Her interest piqued, Amelia agreed and Clarisse soon began scanning the room. Quickly, she found their first victim and discreetly tilted her head to the left.

“How about Lady Stone?”

Amelia regarded Lady Stone, a beautiful woman in her early twenties. With cascading curls of black, ivory skin and regal violet eyes, she had been the Incomparable at her debut two years ago. In the first month after her nod, she had received no less than fifteen proposals of marriage. Unfortunately for her, she had been promised to Lord Stone since her infancy, a man fifteen years her senior and a gentleman of possessive tendencies.

This evening, she radiated elegance and beauty in a simple gown of pale violet. Predictably, her overbearing and overprotective husband loomed nearby. While always the epitome of loveliness, tonight, however, Lady Stone had the misfortune to be wearing a necklace very much resembling a dog's collar.

Amelia leaned closer to Clarisse and whispered quietly, "Lady Stone is as lovely as ever, and her husband, I must say, has become quite cunning in his advanced years. Now, instead of worrying about what his wife is up to, he has only to leash her to know where she is at all times."

Clarisse covered her mouth with her hand to stifle her glee. "I wonder where it is then? Her leash?"

Amelia raised her eyebrows in feigned boredom. "Presumably it is in his coat pocket. I'm sure it'll appear if she wanders too far from him."

The ladies giggled and began scanning the room for another victim. Clarisse rubbed her hands together and said, "How about…"

"You know the rules, Clarisse," Amelia interrupted. "It's my turn now."

Clarisse pouted. "You know I'm not as good as you are."

"Observation and practice my dear," Amelia replied smugly.

"That and the inability to lie," Clarisse grumbled under breath. Amelia still heard though, and while she felt a small stab of discomfort, she decided to ignore it. For the time being.

Amelia turned her head, looking around the room for a person of interest when she spied someone sure to needle her good friend. Nodding her head slightly forward, Amelia indicated a person across the room standing by the refreshment table. "What about Lord White?" she asked innocently, knowing that Clarisse had disliked Lord White for years, though he had never been anything but kind to her since her debut three years ago.

"Amelia Jane Westby!" Clarisse's face tightened in anger and her brown curls fairly quivered atop her head in indignation, "You know I can't stand that man!" she hissed.

"Then you won't have problems being honest, hmm?" Amelia gave her an assessing look and noted her friend's high color and sparkling eyes. She had long suspected that Clarisse had a *tendre* for Lord White, but due to an unfortunate incident involving a twelve year old Clarisse, her long brown braids, an ink pot and a mischievous thirteen year old Lord Roger White, she had sworn to hate him forever.

Maintaining a stony silence, Clarisse fumed for all of thirty seconds and then threw her hands up in exasperation, "Fine." She scrunched her nose in deep concentration and finally announced in surprise, "He has become leaner. And I think maybe a little broader across his shoulders and chest." At that, Clarisse blushed bright red at her own forthrightness.

Smothering an amused smile, Amelia remained silent as Clarisse continued to peruse the leaner, and apparently, more intriguing form of Lord White.

Clarisse's eyes narrowed in speculation, then widened again in surprise. "His hair is longer and it's lighter, too. Almost like he has been spending time in the sun." Here, Clarisse sighed, a soft, wispy sound of pure female appreciation. "He is rather handsome, isn't he?"

Amelia let out a non-committal, "Hmmm."

"And papa said that for having so many responsibilities handed to him at such a young age, he has been keeping his estates in order." Clarisse pulled thoughtfully at her lower lip. "Papa also said that he has been distinguishing himself in Parliament this term, too.

"That's nice, Reesy," Amelia murmured.

Clarisse poked her in the arm. "Are you listening to me at all Amelia?"

Rubbing her arm and laughing, Amelia nodded. "Of course, I'm listening. You've declared you find him handsome, responsible and distinguished." Amelia pretended deep thought. "If I didn't know any better, Reesy, I'd almost say you liked him."

Clarisse scowled at Amelia, but continued to stare at Lord White with such intensity that he must have felt its force clear across the room. Soon, he was rubbing the back of his neck, then slowly he turned and found Clarisse's eyes with his own. Next to her, Clarisse let out a small squeak and lowered her eyes in appearance of maidenly modesty. Amelia watched as Lord White walked purposefully across the room to where she and Clarisse sat.

After extending his greetings to the two ladies and inquiring how they were enjoying the ball, he cleared his throat nervously and smiled down at Clarisse. "May I have the honor of your hand for the next dance, Lady Clarisse?"

Lord White extended his hand, and Clarisse simply nodded her head, placing her small gloved hand in his. Wordlessly, she allowed him to lead her onto the dance for the start of the next set. She didn't even spare a glance backwards for her friend who, had she turned, would have seen that she was smiling smugly.

Amelia was happy for her friend and pleased that her bit of matchmaking had gone so well. Earlier that evening Lord White had approached Amelia and sought her advice on how to win her friend's good opinion. At first, Amelia was doubtful that she would be able to change her friend's mind until Clarisse had brought up their silly honesty game. Knowing that Clarisse would have to tell the truth, Amelia forced her to reassess Lord White. In spite of her protestations that Lord White was a mindless twit who wouldn't be able to find his horse if he were astride it, Amelia suspected that Clarisse truly did like him. And with that in mind, Amelia did her best to reassure Lord White that she would attempt to persuade Clarisse to accept his

attentions. Watching the two of them dance, Clarisse's face alight with quiet happiness, Amelia congratulated herself on a job well done.

With no diverting conversation to distract her from her boredom, and the promise of gossip about her sister's betrothed now lost in the arms of Lord White, Amelia scanned the room for her eldest sister, Beatrice. Light, tinkling laughter soon reached her ears and recognizing it as that of her eldest sister, Amelia arose to search her out.

"WHERE are you going?" a familiarly irritating voice asked. Amelia glanced over at Jeremy who fell into step besides her as she cut through the crowd.

"I'm off to find Bea," Amelia replied curtly as she navigated around a crowd of gathered guests. "As if it's any business of yours," she muttered under her breath.

Jeremy grabbed her arm and pulled her roughly to a stop. "Now Amelia," he said in that condescending voice she hated. "I wish you wouldn't be like that. We're practically family."

She wrenched her arm free from his grasp and glared at him stonily. "Except we're not, Jeremy." Straightening her sleeves, she smiled sweetly, "Nor do I expect we ever will be."

Belatedly, Amelia realized that he had maneuvered her into a darkened hallway far from the noise and bustle of the ballroom. Using his larger size, he pinned her to the wall and angrily grit out between his clenched teeth, "But we could be, Amelia, my sweet." She felt his moist tongue lick up the side of her face, and she shuddered in disgust. "I could show you such pleasure." His hand crept lower to grasp her buttocks through her clothing.

Pretending to enjoy his attentions, she caressed his face with her hand and leaned into his body. "I don't know if you could show me anything that could possible match the pleasure I am about to experience." Raising her leg, she kneed him in the groin. Hard. And she would have to admit that she experienced a large amount of pleasure from that action.

She enjoyed even more the grimace of pain that replaced the self-satisfied smirk that had graced his handsome face moments earlier. When he doubled over and clutched his leg, she easily pushed past him. Though her voice shook a little from the fear and anger that coursed through her body, she said firmly, "You will never be my husband, Jeremy. Not as long as I live." Picking up her skirts, Amelia ran down the hallway and back into the ballroom.

Chapter 2

"AMELIA!" her mother's shrill voice cut through the noise of the crowd and greeted her upon re-entering the ballroom. Wincing, Amelia gathered her skirts a little higher and began to weave in and out amongst the guests more quickly. Soon she was out into the hall racing towards the orangery at the back of the house in the complete opposite direction from where her mother had called her moments ago. She spared a brief glance over her shoulder and found that Lady Anne Westby, her esteemed mother, had also hiked up her skirts in pursuit of her daughter.

"Amelia Jane Westby!" she practically yelled. " I know you can hear me!" Amelia made the mistake of looking over her shoulder again and completely missed the large figure coming out of the shadows.

"Oof!" Amelia grunted. Looking up, she saw that it was none other than her father, Lord Howard Westby, blocking her path.

"Hello, daughter." His blue eyes twinkled down at Amelia. "I believe your mother would like a word with you." He gently placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face her mother, who by this time had caught up to her.

Before turning to leave, Lord Howard leaned in and whispered softly in Amelia's ear. "Just hear her out, Amelia. Please." With those words of advice, he placed a soft kiss on Amelia's cheek, patted his out-of-breath wife on the shoulder and returned to the ballroom.

Lady Anne snapped open her fan and began to rapidly fan her face. "I know you heard me Amelia." She all but glared at her daughter.

Amelia, smart girl that she was, remained silent.

Lady Anne's eyes narrowed. "Did you hear me Amelia?"

Narrowing her own eyes, Amelia grit out a sullen, "Yes." Lady Anne gave a short nod of satisfaction.

"I thought so." She continued to fan herself. "Where were you going?"

"To find Bea."

Her mother looked up and down the hallway. "She's not here. Did you think she was here?"

"No mother," Amelia sighed. "I did not think she was out here."

The fan snapped closed. "Then why were you looking for her out here?"

"Because, mother, I was trying to avoid you!" Amelia threw her hands into the air in exasperation.

Not one to be outdone, Lady Anne took her fan and poked her daughter in the chest. “And why did you wish to avoid me, I might ask?”

Amelia knew what her mother was about and she also knew that she could not avoid answering the questions forever. So, she stalled.

“*Parceque, ma mere, vous aimez gérer ma vie,*” Amelia replied smoothly in flawless French.

Her mother huffed and tapped her foot. “In English, Amelia. You know I don’t understand you when you speak French.”

She cleared her throat. Then again. “Could you repeat the question?”

“Enough of your games, girl,” her mother snapped. “You know very well what the question was, so you had better answer it before you make yourself sick.”

Amelia knew her mother was right. She could only avoid telling the truth when asked a direct question for so long. Over the years, she had developed several tricks to help her do that. She had purposely learned as many languages as she could so she could conceal an unpleasant truth in another language. Preferably an obscure one that not many Londoners had studied. In fact, and Amelia was quite proud of this, she was fluent in a half dozen languages. It almost always worked.

Once, though, she had been dancing with a young man who had asked her what she thought of his new, shockingly bright pink jacket, she had replied in Greek with, “It looks like a flamingo exploded all over it.” Unfortunately for her, he had recently returned from an extended stay abroad in Greece and understood exactly what she had said. He had left her standing in the middle of the dance floor while he stormed off. After that, anytime he saw her at a ball, he gave her the cut direct. Not that Amelia minded. Much.

Feeling the beginnings of a massive stomach ache, Amelia blurted out, “Because, mother, you love to manage my life and I am tired of it!”

Lady Anne frowned and then turned her head away from Amelia. Soon, Amelia could swear that she heard sniffling. “That’s not a very nice thing to say to your own mother, Amelia.” Her voice was wobbly as if she were holding back tears. “After all, I have done for you.” Her voice faded into a small sob.

Groaning, Amelia shook her head. Whenever her mother wanted her to do something, she made sure to ask direct questions of Amelia, so that Amelia would be forced to be completely honest. Then, feigning hurt feelings, her mother would manipulate Amelia into doing something that she really didn’t want to do. This time, though, Amelia would remain strong.

Amelia saw her mother’s lace handkerchief being whisked out. “And all I wanted was to introduce you to this nice man.” More sniffling. Doubtless there was some eye dabbing, too.

Still Amelia remained silent. Her mother peeked over at her daughter,

then quickly began to wipe at her eyes in earnest. “He hasn’t been to London since you’ve been out so he doesn’t know…”

Doesn’t know I am a freak, Amelia finished in her head. Her mother sobbed louder now, her shoulders shaking up and down. “I just want to have a grandchild before I die.” She turned her tear filled blue eyes to Amelia. “I practically have one foot in the grave already,” she warbled. Then placing her right hand dramatically over her heart, she intoned mournfully, “I don’t know how much longer I have to live.”

Amelia snorted and looked at her mother. At age forty-nine, her mother was as beautiful as she was at her debut. No grey dared to streak her lovely golden locks and despite having three children, her figure was as fit and trim as a younger woman’s. And as far as Amelia knew, her mother hadn’t been sick a day in her life.

The sobbing continued, louder and louder. The few guests that had ventured out into the hallway were eyeing the little tableau with interest. Amelia had to stop her mother before she made an absolute spectacle of herself.

“Fine mother,” she hissed between clenched teeth. “I’ll meet this gentleman.”

“Oh, Amelia,” her mother smiled all traces of her earlier crying gone from her face. “I just know you’ll be perfect for each other.” Patting her daughter on the shoulder, she kissed her cheek. “He arrives within the hour.”

Then smiling warmly at the onlookers, she walked over to them shaking her head in amusement. “How silly I was,” she said in her best Lady Westby voice. “I thought I had lost the ring that my husband gave me on our twentieth anniversary. I was absolutely distraught because I swore I had put it on tonight, but Amelia pointed out that I had lent it to my dear aunt at her last visit.” Amused laughter floated down the hallway as her mother flattered and simpered and cooed with her guests, essentially diffusing the situation that they had seen.

Amelia shook her head. Thank God no one had asked her what was going on. She would have been forced to tell the truth. *Well you see, my mother is actually a big fraud and she cries like a toddler to get her own way. This time it’s because she wants me to marry a man I have never met because apparently he hasn’t heard how odd I am. Old mother dear is getting quite desperate.*

She giggled to herself imagining the looks on her mother’s guest’s faces if she had told them that. With footsteps fading into the distance, Amelia clearly heard her mother’s voice in the now empty hall. Amelia stifled her giggles.

“Amelia.” Amelia turned to see her mother silhouetted in the door frame. “One hour, Amelia.”

With her mother’s threat still echoing in the now empty hallway, Amelia plunked herself into the nearest chair and leaned her head back.

Closing her eyes, she willed the last half hour of her life back. *Or away. Or different. Anything but what it was now.*

The last time her mother had introduced her to a promising gentleman, he had been over seventy and deaf as a post. Her mother had explained that at least he wouldn't be able to hear her unpleasant remarks. When Amelia pointed out that just because he couldn't hear her didn't mean that she still didn't have to put up with him, her mother said he would most likely die soon and leave her a wealthy widow. As tempting as the promise of independence was, Amelia just could not stomach marriage to a man over three times her age.

A shudder ran through her just thinking about the lecherous old goat. He had tried hard enough to convince her, catching her unawares on the balcony. With a naughty leer, he had tried to push her against the outside of the house to kiss her. Amelia remembered his rank, hot breath fanning against her cheeks. She had ended up slapping him on the face and then running away. Since then, she had done her best to avoid her mother at balls such as this. Tonight, her luck had obviously run out.

"Gad," a familiar voice echoed throughout the hallway. "Who is she throwing at you this time?"

Turning her head swiftly, Amelia watched as her eldest sister Beatrice sauntered the length of the hallway. Tonight she looked stunning in a simple gown of shimmering gold that complimented the honey tones in her hair. The material clung to her lithe frame catching the light of the candles as it moved over her body. And her bodice…

"You're missing part of your dress, Bea," Amelia quipped dryly.

Bea laughed a light, musical sound. "My maid said she loved the material, so I gave it to her to make a nightdress."

Amelia shook her head at her sister's daring. "Naughty, Bea. I'm surprised mother didn't throw a fit when she saw you tonight."

Taking the chair next to Amelia, Bea sat and leaned in conspiratorially. "Ah, but that is assuming I saw mother and that I haven't been actively avoiding her."

"How did you manage that? I did my best to avoid mother tonight and she still found me." Amelia gave her sister a disgruntled stare, a small pout forming on her full lips.

"Well, Mimi," Bea began authoritatively, "you are presuming that our mother wants something to do with me." Though her tone was flippant, Amelia knew how bitter Bea felt over her estrangement with their mother.

At age eighteen, Beatrice had been the Incomparable of her debut year. Though she was well admired and could have married almost anyone, Bea had quickly fallen in love and had agreed to marry the first man who had offered for her. Mother had been ecstatic that Beatrice had managed to snag one of the most eligible bachelors on the market at that time. Lord Bradley

Easton, Seventh Earl of Sussex. His mere name sent mother into absolute fits of ecstasy. When he died unexpectedly five years later, mother had mourned with Beatrice. But when Beatrice shed her mourning clothing a full three months early and had taken up cards, drinking and who knows what else, mother had essentially washed her hands of her eldest daughter.

No one knew what Beatrice's marriage was like, but Amelia had an idea. She had seen bruises on her sister's arms once when she had stopped by for a visit. Bea had quickly laughed them off, saying she was so clumsy and was constantly walking into things. Then she had begged Amelia to keep them to herself because she didn't want anyone to worry. Especially her husband.

Amelia knew, though, that something else had caused those bruises, and she was fairly certain who had caused them. That's why Amelia suspected her sister had stopped mourning prematurely and why she behaved as she did. Because she kept silent about her marriage, no one could understand how wretched her life had been those five years. Except for Amelia and she had been sworn to secrecy. Which was why mother continued to ignore Beatrice and Beatrice continued to behave poorly.

As many times as Amelia had tried to console Beatrice, she knew her older sister wouldn't listen to anything she had to say about mother. Instead, she changed the subject.

"I don't know," she stated, essentially causing Beatrice to rouse herself from her musings.

"Don't know what, Mimi?"

"I don't know who mother is throwing at me this time."

"Do you think we know him?" Bea scooted her chair closer to Amelia's.

"Mother says he hasn't been in London since my come out, so I would say no." Amelia chewed on her lower lip, a sure sign that she was thinking. "Except that she did invite him." Amelia shrugged. "She must know of him at least."

Bea pondered this information for a bit. "I know almost everyone who is in town for the season and I don't recall any new faces."

Sometimes Amelia envied Beatrice with her classic good looks and her slender frame. Almost always she envied her sister her immense popularity. If Bea said she knew everyone who was in Town for the Season, it was probably a good bet that she did.

But, Amelia mused, there is always the chance that she could be lying, too. Bea's curse manifested in a completely different manner than Amelia's did. Or Evie's for that matter. Both Evie and Amelia's curses were pretty straightforward. If Amelia told an untruth or refused to answer a direct question honestly, she became ill to her stomach.

Since Evie was so little when they were all cursed, she had the lightest punishment. When in the presence of others, Evie was mute. That's not to say that she couldn't speak, though. If she were alone or only with family, Evie could talk for hours and hours, but if someone outside the family were near her, she would instantly lose her ability to speak for up to a week. When she was growing up, they had all made sure to know where Evie was at all times because if she got caught speaking to herself when company was about and ended up mute for a week, they all heard about it for another week as soon as she was able to speak again.

Beatrice's curse, though, was a little more unclear. It was always difficult to determine if Bea was lying or telling the truth. Sometimes when she would tell the truth, her story would be so fantastical that one would think that it had to be a lie. Other times, she would tell the most convincing lie and everyone would think she was telling the truth. Because of that, most people treated Beatrice like a pretty face. No one truly believed anything she said, which was a shame because Beatrice was a shrewd woman of keen intelligence. Amelia had always thought it was because Bea was the instigator of the lie that she had it more difficult than the other two did.

"...could be Lord Stanton." Bea's voice interrupted her musings.

Amelia snapped out of her thoughts and looked into the irritated eyes of her sister. Bea did not like to be ignored. "What, Bea? I was woolgathering."

"I said," Bea restated with a huff, "that your mystery man could be Lord Stanton. He's recently inherited the title and I heard he had come to Town to look for a wife."

Lord Stanton? Amelia mentally scanned her list of acquaintances, and realized that his name was not one she knew. "Where is he from, do you know?"

"I think Scotland." Bea responded absently, too busy smoothing out imaginary wrinkles on her gown to notice how agitated her sister had become.

"Where did you hear all of this?"

"Oh, I ran into Clarisse when she first arrived tonight. She said that Lord Stanton is a first or second cousin of Evie's betrothed."

"Ah, so that was what Reesy wanted to tell me. She never got a chance to because she was swept off her feet by Lord White." Amelia smiled happily thinking about her friend's delighted face as Lord White led her to the dance floor. "If I were a betting woman, Bea, I would bet a pound that by the end of the Season, Clarisse and Lord White will be married."

"I'll take that bet, Mimi," Beatrice said with a wicked grin. "Personally, I think Lord White won't have the stones to get it done, but it's your pound." She stood suddenly and smoothed out her skirts. Grabbing Amelia's hands and pulling her up as well, she kissed both of Amelia's cheeks.

"Darling, as much as I would love to sit and chat all evening, I have a card game to get to, and you," here she adjusted Amelia's bodice so it showed more of her ample bosom, "have a date with a Scotsman."

Amelia watched Beatrice until she had left the hallway and then angrily yanked her bodice up to where it was before. *Drat that Beatrice*, Amelia fumed. She paced the hallway for several minutes, obsessing about the promise she had made her mother. Then deciding that she wasn't quite up to the task of meeting 'the Scotsman' just yet, Amelia made her way to the side door and out to the stables.

The moment Amelia walked outside she was calmed, always finding comfort and peace in the outdoors. She looked up at the clear evening sky and found her favorite stars twinkling above. Breathing in deeply, Amelia could smell the faint scent of honeysuckle and roses that bordered the walkway to the stables. She sniffed again. *And cigar smoke?* Amelia became instantly alert. No one was supposed to be smoking near the stables. All the groomsmen knew that. Her father would dismiss anyone of them on the spot if they so much as puffed a cigar anywhere near his beloved thoroughbreds.

Picking up her skirts, she began to run down the pathway towards the stable. As she rounded the far side of the stable, she ran into something solid and warm and most definitely male.

"Oof! she screeched loudly. Strong arms reached out to steady her and Amelia, caught unawares and frightened, kicked her leg wildly into what she hoped was, as Bea called it, a gentleman's 'sweet spot.'

She heard a grunt of pain and a rough voice dangerously close to her ear gritted out, "You little minx!" Then Amelia's world turned upside down.

Chapter 3

TAVIS McGuire was having a bad night. His informant had just arrived and was not telling him what he wanted to hear. In fact, he wasn't telling Tavis anything he didn't already know. "How is it that in your six weeks of surveillance with the family that you have yet to find any concrete evidence implementing the man?"

The man shifted uncomfortably on his feet and seemed to grimace as if in pain. "He's very secretive, my lord, and keeps his affairs close to himself."

"You can't even tell me if there have been frequent visitors to the house that his lordship sees regularly or if he leaves home for long periods of time?" At the uneasy look on his face, Tavis sighed loudly and ran his fingers through his hair. "Meeks, you must have something you can tell me!" he exploded in exasperation.

"The ladies do receive frequent visitors, and one visitor in particular is at the house on an almost daily basis."

"Yes, yes, Meeks. You've already mentioned Lady Clarisse Thornston, and I believe I've already told you that we have cleared her and her family of any suspicion."

"I am sorry, my lord. There's not much more I can tell you."

"Your search of his study yielded nothing useful? No hidden compartments or secret doors you can investigate later?"

With only continued silence from Meeks, Tavis gave up. "Go away, Meeks. Unless you have something useful for me by tomorrow morning, you will be reassigned and no longer connected to this mission."

"Yes, sir," Meeks replied sullenly and walked swiftly away into the night leaving Tavis to grimly ponder what he had just learned. Or not learned, as was the case. Six weeks of surveillance gone, and he was no closer to discovering what he needed in order to take down a known traitor. And without that documentation, Tavis groaned, I'll more than likely have to proceed to Plan B. His hand nervously grasped his neck already contemplating the hangman's noose that would surely tighten if he couldn't ferret out the traitor's secrets.

Pulling out his pocket watch, Tavis checked the time. *One more hour,* Tavis sighed grimly. He felt the noose pull tighter.

"Hell," he snorted patting his horse on the rump. "This whole year has been some sort of Shakespearean tragedy." Tavis light a cigar and walked out into the warm evening air to lean against the smooth wooden sides of the stable walls. He coolly assessed the expansive Mayfair mansion alit with glittering candles while thoughtfully puffing his cigar. Even from where he was standing, he could hear the faint strains of music spilling from the house into the May night. He sighed. This was not what he wanted to be doing tonight. But, ever since his brother's solicitor had tracked him down on the

continent almost three months ago to inform him of his brother's death, Tavis's life had been turned upside down. Now the heir to the Earldom of Stanton, Tavis had all the responsibilities that came with the title.

And none of the fun, he thought glumly.

He remembered the day that the solicitor had found him and told him he must come home.

"Home?" he said incredulously. "Stanton hasn't been my home for years, not since John assumed the title of Earl, and Ballywith has never been my home."

The solicitor, a Mr. Alfred T. Coombes, had been nervous, Tavis remembered. He was a tall man, but lean and leggy like a newborn colt. His actions were uncoordinated, as well, almost as if he hadn't quite mastered the mechanics of placing one foot in front of the other. Tavis thought he resembled a wooden puppet with all his jerking and flailing around. And his damn tie. The man was constantly fidgeting with his cravat and pulling it away from his neck. But he had been charged with delivering a message to the new Earl of Stanton, and Mr. Alfred T. Coombes did not shirk his duty.

"Mr. McGuire, sir, while you may not have made Stanton and the Ballywith estate your home for several years, it is now yours. You must return home and assume your responsibilities. It is imperative."

Tavis had never liked being told what to do. In fact, most of Tavis's life had been in the pursuit of doing exactly what he wanted to do. Being the second son, he always knew that he was not destined for the Earldom or the entailing responsibilities that accompanied the title. From the day he was born and sent away to live with his aunt, he lived a carefree life, never bothering to learn about estate management, finances and the like because he knew that the Earldom was in the capable hands of his eldest brother John.

So when this nervous solicitor who obviously tied his ties too tight had tracked him down and told him he had to return to take over the responsibilities of the title, Tavis objected. Strongly.

"What do you mean I must assume my responsibilities?" He advanced on Mr. Alfred T. Coombes, his voice calm but menacing. "Who gave you the authority to uproot my life and to tell me what I should be doing?" Tavis had cornered the solicitor, who had by now a kind of wild-eyed look to him and had grabbed him by the jacket.

But Mr. Alfred T. Coombes was not an idiot. Tavis had to give him that. Realizing that his words had most likely angered the new Earl of Stanton, he quickly backtracked. With Adam's apple bobbing, he managed to stutter out, "Ah, well, you see, it's just that,..erm, aside from inheriting the title, of which I was to inform you, and I have done so, it was also the express wish of your brother that you be found and brought home."

Tavis's grip on the solicitor's jacket tightened. "What do you mean it was the express wish of my brother?" Tavis and John had never been close; a twelve year gap had separated the two brothers. By the time Tavis was old

enough to not be a nuisance to his brother, John had essentially disappeared leaving Tavis to wonder about the brother he never knew.

Nodding profusely, Mr. Coombes rifled through his pockets (a difficult feat, what with Tavis's iron hold on his jacket) and managed to produce an envelope. Thrusting it under Tavis's nose, he explained, "Your brother's dying wish was that I find you and give you this letter."

Eying the letter and the unmistakable seal of the Earl of Stanton, Tavis released the solicitor and took the letter.

"Leave me!" he ordered. Mr. Coombes was only too happy to oblige as he swiftly vacated Tavis's premises for the safety of his own room at a nearby inn.

Tavis had sat before his fire for what felt like hours just staring at the letter in his hands. He didn't want to believe that his brother had died and made him Earl, and to Tavis's mind, opening the letter would somehow make everything that twit Coombes had said be true.

With shaking hands, Tavis broke the seal on the letter and read his brother's last words to him.

Dear Tavis,

If you are reading this letter, then I am dead. Please do not grieve for me. Death will be a sweet release after years of suffering. I never had the chance to know you, Tavis, the difference in our ages being so great. But just because I wasn't there doesn't mean that I didn't love you or wish you well.

By the time you were born, I was already twelve years of age and well on my way to becoming the future Earl of Stanton. Our parents, as you know, had been older when they conceived me, and mother's pregnancy was quite difficult. They never thought to have another child. Though mother was shocked when she found out she was expecting you, she was so happy. I was too, because it meant that I would have a baby brother or sister as companion. Father was too worried about mother to be excited about a new child and frequently predicted that mother would die in childbirth. Well, the old man was right. Her pregnancy was difficult, but she delivered you even though it took all of her strength. Less than a month later, our mother, Lady Janet, passed quietly in the night.

I wish you had known mother, Tavis. She was a sweet and generous woman, and she brought warmth and laughter into our home. Her death devastated father and left him a cold, unfeeling man. He wasn't always like that, brother. Oh, he was serious by nature and very shrewd when it came to business dealings, but he was never without feeling, never cruel. But her death broke something in him, and the old man decided you were to blame.

After mother died, I didn't see you again until you were six years old. Father couldn't bear to have you in the home, so you were sent to live with Aunt Millie, and I was stuck at home with a temperamental moody father. I will only say that when I left for boarding school a year after mother's death, it was as if the sun finally shined again.

Most holidays I spent with father in London, Ballywith too full of lingering memories of mother. One year Father was occupied with business, so I was given permission to spend the holiday with you and Aunt Millie. I don't know if you will even remember that time, but it was the happiest I had been in years. I taught you to ride your first horse, Legacy, and I even taught you how to shoot a gun. I remember you cried when I had to return to University.

The last time I saw you was when I was sent to Aunt Millie's after I contracted lung fever at University. You were eight years old at the time. Father didn't want me in London, and he still couldn't bear to travel to Ballywith, so to Aunt Millie's I went. I lingered near death for almost two weeks. Though I was insensible, I remember that you wanted to come in to see me but that father wouldn't let you. Even through the haze of sickness, I could hear him yelling at you to stay out. But one night, Tavis, you must have snuck in when father was asleep. I remember that you held my hand and talked to me the whole night. I don't know what you said, but it was that which helped me to come back from death. When I awoke, I asked for you, but father said you had been sent away to school. I was desperate for word of you, brother, but father refused to tell me where you had gone.

After that illness, I was never the same again. I was never as strong again or as well again. I eventually married, a lovely young woman named Mary. Unfortunately, we were never blessed with children. She passed away just three weeks ago, and I am not much longer for this world.

I am ashamed, Tavis, that I never was the brother that you deserved. I let father bully me into ignoring you. He forbade me to speak of you or to find you once you left school. He even threatened to cut off my allowance, and as a young man who had just married, I foolishly believed that money was more important than you. Forgive me my cowardice, brother, and know that every day since the old man has been dead, I have been looking for you, hoping that you'll come home to Ballywith.

I know you'll say that Ballywith has never been your home. Just remember that a house is just a shell, Tavis. It's not a home until there is love. Mary helped me see that. With her love and strength, I was able to banish all the bad memories from that house for good. We were happy there.

Find a good woman, marry her and create your own memories at Ballywith. Make your own happiness.

Your loving brother,

John

Tavis had sat there in his chair before the fire long after the last flames had died away, his brother's letter scattered on the floor below. So many nights he had lain awake wondering why. Why was he sent away? Why did his father hate him? Why did John never come back to see him?

He remembered with clarity those precious moments with his brother at Aunt Millie's. It was true, too, that he cried when John went away the first time. He had admired his brother and loved him with all the fierceness and

loyalty of a child. When Tavis was sent away at age eight, it had ripped him apart to be separated from his brother. Tavis had been sure that John would find him. Every day he waited for a letter or a message to come from his brother just for him. Every day he grew a little more disillusioned. Then one day about seven months after he was sent to school, he just gave up. He closed up that part of his heart and had never looked in it again.

This letter, though, changed everything. It told him that he was loved. It told him he was wanted by his mother and for the brief time she lived, she had loved him. It told him that John had never forgotten him and had loved him all of these years.

Tavis cradled his head in his hands and would have wept had he the strength to do so. It also told him his brother was truly gone and if not for his stubbornness and pride, he could have reconciled with his brother years ago. His brother's messengers had found him, but Tavis steadfastly refused to read any missives that were sent to him. He wanted his brother to suffer like he had all those years ago.

"What a fool I have been," Tavis said bitterly to the dark room. "All that time wasted and now I'll never see him again." Downing a hefty amount of Scotch to drown his sorrows, Tavis stumbled to his bed and passed a fitful night's sleep.

On the morning, it was with a heavy heart and a newfound sense of responsibility that Tavis McGuire, the Fifth Earl of Stanton, sought out Mr. Alfred T. Coombes to tell him he was going home.

Chapter 4

Two months ago…

"WHAT do you mean they've all been sold?" he yelled at Mr. Coombes, his nervous twit of a solicitor. He had come home to find his estate in near ruin and the horses in his brother's stables, *his horses*, had been sold from under his brother's nose.

Even though Tavis had had no contact with his brother since his father sent him away to school, that didn't mean that Tavis hadn't made discreet inquiries about his brother and his interests through circuitous routes. It was through these routes that he had learned of his brother's interest in breeding race horses. Tavis had recalled how much he had enjoyed riding with John at Aunt Millie's. In fact, it was one of his clearest memories of his childhood and one that he still remembered with pleasure.

So much so that in his travels with the army if Tavis happened to come across a horse of good breeding that he thought would increase the productivity of the stables, he had bought it and sent it to Ballywith with a messenger. Anonymously, of course. It wouldn't do to appear as if he were interested in John's affairs. After all, he was just ensuring the prosperity of the estate should anything untoward happen to John, Tavis had reasoned at the time.

But now it seemed that all of the trouble he had undertaken in choosing prime breeding stock was for nothing, if what Mr. Coombes was saying was indeed true. He leveled a steely stare in Mr. Coombes's direction, who swallowed and began pulling on the collar of his shirt. "It's just as I said, Lord Stanton. They all were sold shortly before your brother's death."

Tavis simply stared at the man until he jumped up from his chair and ran around the front of the desk carrying the ledger of the estate's expenses. Hastily opening the book, he cleared his throat and pointed a shaky finger at the last year's expenses.

"As you can see, the estate has been rapidly leaching funds. Poor growing seasons resulting in lost crops means lost income. Furthermore, we've had several harsh winters and much of the livestock perished. Your brother did his best to replace the herds, but at considerable cost."

Mr. Coombes turned several more pages to further illustrate the sad state of affairs at Ballywith. "In addition to loss of income, repairs have had to been made on tenant cottages and two years ago, there was a substantial fire in the servant's quarters here at Ballywith that necessitated extensive repairs."

Tavis studied the ledger for several minutes thinking while Coombes droned on detailing the losses to the estate. It was true; he knew very little about his holdings, but his aunt had apprised him that though his father was 'an unholy prick,' the old earl was a wealthy man.

Despite his indifference towards Tavis, he had sent him to the best schools and seen that he always wore the best clothing. When John visited, he was always richly attired and traveled in a chaise and four. John had even had

a trip to the continent when he turned twenty-two. He remembered his aunt telling him about that when he had been home one year on holiday. Also, the old earl provided Aunt Millie with a generous monthly allowance that allowed her to live in a modest manor with a handful of servants to care for her.

Which is why when Coombes said that the estate had no more money, he questioned it. Because even if everything that Coombes had said was true, all those losses would in no way account for the lack of funds that now existed.

"But it was my understanding that the estate had enough funds to cover the loss of income and the repairs without seriously threatening the monies tied to the estate," Tavis explained, "So where has all the money gone?"

Mr. Coombes was very nervous now. His face had flushed, and small dots of perspiration had broken out on his forehead. Tavis noted all of this with increasing suspicion.

"Is there something you're not telling me Coombes?" Tavis asked with deceptive mildness as he rose from his desk to glare at the solicitor.

"Ah, it's just that," Coombes stammered quickly retreating to the other side of the desk, "that most of the money was spent before your brother became Earl.

"Spent how?" Tavis prompted.

"Spent on repaying debts earned by your father, the third Earl of Stanton. Before he died, he had racked up considerable gaming debts that severely limited the spending abilities of the estate." Mr. Coombes sank nervously into the chair he had so recently quitted and began to fiddle the buttons on his coat.

"Is there more, Mr. Coombes?" Tavis asked dryly, noting the increased agitation of the solicitor and the sickly pallor that had suddenly washed over his face.

"Before dying, your father told my father, Mr. Coombes Sr., who was your father's man of business, that he'd be damned if he left a penny of his money go to feeding and housing the two most worthless sons in all of Scotland." Mr. Coombes finished in a rush and braced his hands on the arms of the chair almost as if he were ready to push off and run if Tavis showed any signs of displeasure at the news he had just relayed.

Seeing the other man's agitation, Tavis yelled, "Calm down, man! I'm not going to run you through for delivering a message from the old bastard." Mr. Coombes visibly relaxed, though his eyes remained wary.

Raking a hand through his hair, Tavis turned his back on Mr. Coombes to stare sightlessly out the window. It would figure that father would find some way to torment me beyond the grave. Turning from the window, he asked Coombes tiredly, "I assume that John did what he could to regain the funds."

"Yes, my lord." Coombes cleared his throat again, "And I have explained to you the problems that have plagued the estate since your brother took over."

"In detail, Mr. Coombes." Tavis moved back to the desk and sank wearily into his chair where he then proceeded to prop his legs up on the desktop. Laying his head against the back of the chair, he closed his eyes. Pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, he desperately tried to ward off the pounding headache he could feel forming. "Which is why he sold the horses, I presume."

There was a long pause in which Tavis could hear the nervous rustling of his solicitor. Tavis cracked open an eye and glared at him. He responded nervously. "Not quite my lord." Then pulled on his collar.

"Explain." Tavis was curt and he knew it, but damn it! Trying to get information out of Coombes was about as painful as running through a briar patch naked. Which he had only ever done once. When he had been drunk. Even now, Tavis winced at the memory.

But Mr. Coombes had begun. "Your brother was approached by a man named Lord Westby about a month before he died. Westby told your brother that he was in possession of an outstanding note belonging to your father."

"How much?" Tavis asked impatiently. "The note. How much was it for?"

"I believe it was for five thousand pounds." Mr. Coombes stated continuing his narrative. "Lord Westby assured your brother that he would be willing to forgive the note for the top four racers in the stables."

Tavis's legs dropped to the floor, and he jumped up in clear agitation. "What? Any one of those horses would have easily covered the amount of the note plus a healthy amount of interest, too." He began to pace in frustration behind his desk.

"Well, yes, that's what I told your brother, Lord Stanton," Coombes continued. "Though he was fair gone with grief for his wife and ill himself, your brother realized it too, but Westby was insistent. He said that he'd take those horses in exchange for the note and his guaranteed silence on a delicate matter." Coombes trailed off and flushed deeply. If possible, he looked more nervous than he had ever been.

"What delicate matter, Coombes?" Tavis had stopped his pacing to stare at his flustered solicitor.

Though he was still obviously agitated, he continued. "Lord Westby told your brother that he was in possession of information that could prove damaging to the memory of your father and to the continued legacy of the Earldom of Stanton."

"Such as…" Tavis prompted.

"Such as information about some of your father's activities during the war." Coombes started drumming his fingers nervously on the arm of the chair. "Lord Westby claimed that he had several pieces of incriminating information that indicated your father had engaged in treasonous activities during the war." By the time he had finished, Coombes's voice was no more than a hoarse whisper.

Tavis stilled and peered at Coombes intently. "Did he say what kind of activities, Coombes?"

"No, my lord," Coombes replied quietly. "But your brother saw Westby's evidence, and it was damning enough that he agreed to Westby's terms."

Resuming his pacing, Tavis began to think. So the old man had been a traitor, the rat bastard. He smiled humorlessly. Apparently I was not the only one he betrayed. It comforted him on some level to know that his father's treachery had not been limited to just him. No, he had betrayed his family and his country and now he was left to clean up the mess. God, if Westby were to talk…

"Where are the papers that Westby showed my brother, the ones that incriminated my father?" Tavis walked quickly to his desk and began rummaging through the mass of papers his brother had left him.

He heard Coombes's quiet voice cut through his frantic searching. "There are no papers, my lord."

"What?" Tavis looked up hopefully from the pile of papers he had strewn across the desk. "Did John burn them then?" The solicitor remained silent. "Thank God. Then the only ones who know besides Westby are you and me."

Mr. Coombes shook his head slowly. "I'm afraid you misunderstood me, my lord. When I said there are no papers, I meant that your brother never had possession of them."

The implications of what his solicitor had told him began to sink in. "Then if John never had them, then who?"

Mr. Coombes pulled at his collar again and swallowed loudly. But he looked Tavis in the eye when he said, "Westby, my lord."

Tavis sat and lowered his head to the desk contemplating the myriad of problems that he had been given upon returning home. He almost wished that Mr. Alfred T. Coombes had never found him despite the revelations he learned about his family. If only Coombes had been a week later, he would have moved on already, and these problems would belong to someone else and not him.

"My lord?" Coombes tentative voice interrupted Tavis's dark musings about his untimely arrival in Tavis's life. "There is one more thing. Your brother must have told Westby that he was dying and that he hoped you would be coming home." Tavis heard Coombes shuffling around for something.

Soon a crisp white envelope was shoved under Tavis's nose where it still lay on his desk.

"Westby found me before he left your brother and gave me this to give to you." Having delivered his message, Mr. Alfred T. Coombes picked up his attaché case and quietly left the room.

Tavis heard, rather than saw, the door close and was grateful that Coombes had left. He didn't think he could handle any more bad news because he honestly thought he might need to kill Coombes if he said one more thing in his stuffy lawyer's voice.

Reeling from the news he had just learned about his brother, his finances and his wretch of a father, Tavis walked to the sideboard with letter in hand and poured himself a generous amount of Scotch. Then he chose a comfortable seat near the fire and opened up the missive from Lord Westby.

Two lines were scrawled across the fine paper in a bold, slanted hand.

We have matters to discuss. Come see me when you return.

Westby

Tavis crumpled the letter and threw it in the fire. He watched it until the flames had licked away the last of the paper. Even after the fire burned down, Tavis sat before the cooling embers thinking late into the night.

At the break of day, Tavis was packed and on the road headed to London.

AFTER an arduous four day trek across Scotland and down to London, Tavis wanted to find Westby as quickly as possible. He stopped briefly at his new London townhouse to change and eat before departing again to begin his search. Throughout the remainder of the day and most of the following one, Tavis wondered what role Westby played in this whole mess. There had to be a reason Westby maintained possession of the incriminating papers that had caused his brother to give away their horses for the paltry sum of five thousand pounds. And he was determined to find out why.

It wasn't too difficult to find Lord Westby. He asked around casually at Whites and other clubs most gentlemen frequented. After a day of inquiries, Tavis had been introduced to Lord Westby at Whites. The two of them had met for lunch and it was while dining that Westby's intentions for keeping the documents were revealed.

"I want you to marry my middle daughter, Stanton," Westby stated matter-of-factly over drinks.

Tavis spluttered and hastily wiped his face with his napkin. "I beg your pardon?"

"My daughter, I want you to marry her." Casually, he picked up his drink. "You do that, and I'll give you the papers about your father."

"What's wrong with her?" Tavis blurted out, more than a little shocked at Westby's daring. Something obviously had to be very wrong with his middle child if he was willing to blackmail a peer of the realm into marrying her.

Lord Westby's face mottled in anger. "I'll have you know there is nothing wrong with my daughter. She's lovely, and intelligent and too fine for the likes of you."

"Then why me?" Tavis was truly incredulous. Even though it had been less than a month since he inherited his title, matrimonial minded mothers had been throwing every eligible female under the age of thirty at him. Having Lord Westby do the same was a little surprising, but not out of the realm of normal.

What had surprised him was that he had felt he had to use blackmail to coerce someone into marrying his daughter. That usually didn't happen. He asked again. "I repeat, what is wrong with her?"

Westby had calmed himself, and his face no longer appeared to be a deep puce of rage. "I said she is a very lovely young woman, and she is. Accomplished in languages, riding, and household management." He paused, and Tavis swore he saw the man squirm uncomfortably in his seat. "She has a tendency to be a little outspoken is all." Westby refused to look Tavis in the eye, a sure bet he was hiding something more. "Some people find it off-putting." Westby picked up his glass and downed the remainder of his drink.

"So off-putting that you need to blackmail someone into marrying her?" Tavis queried shrewdly.

Westby poured another drink and downed it in one gulp. "She just needs a strong hand is all. Someone who won't take offense at her odd ways. That's why I thought of you."

Tavis was dumbfounded. He had never met Lord Westby before today, so it was highly unlikely that Westby knew anything about him.

Seeing his confusion, Westby continued, "I knew your father, you understand? He talked about you but rarely, but when he did I could tell there was no love lost. One day about five years ago, he told me that you had joined up, sent to the Continent to fight the Frogs. He was proud of you, though he would be loathe to admit it."

Here Tavis looked at him skeptically. If there was one thing he knew with certainty it was that his father had never been proud of him a day in his life. In fact, he remembered the day he left for the Continent. He had come to London to meet his regiment before sailing off. Deciding to visit his father had been a spur of the moment decision. If he died, he at least wanted his father to know. Tavis had easily found him in his offices at Parliament. After he had told his father he had bought a commission, the old earl had simply said, "You'll probably screw that up, too, and be sent home in a pine box within a month." That being said, the old earl had waved him out of his office and firmly shut the door.

The old man must have truly believed Tavis would be killed within a month because a batman was awaiting him at the docks before he shipped out. All that his batman, a man by the name of Jeremiah Meeks, had said when presented to Tavis was that his father thought he could be of service to Tavis during the war. This one act had given Tavis hope that his father did not completely hate him. However, he still remained skeptical that at any point the old man would have come close to admitting pride in him.

His doubt must have shown plainly on his face because Westby held up his hands and crossed his heart.

"It's the truth," he slurred sounding a little drunk after having downed three glasses of fine whisky in rapid succession. "An' that's when I started to follow you. On the quiet like, that is." He poured another glass a little unsteadily this time. "I took note of battles you had led, skirmishes you had won." He leaned in closer to Tavis, his foul breath uncomfortably close to Tavis's nose. Tavis valiantly tried not to pinch his nostrils, so he held his breath instead. "I know people, you understand? People in high places. They would mention your name, casual like, at White's or in Parliament. They said you were making a name for yourself in the army."

Blessedly, Westby sat back in his chair taking his foul smelling breath with him. Tavis let out the breath he had been holding, but Westby wasn't done. "An idea began to form." Westby tapped his temple with his forefinger and leveled a squinty-eyed stare at Tavis. He hissed out in a low voice, "You could help her break the curse."

Immediately, Tavis straightened and took note of Westby's blathering. "What curse?"

Realizing he might have been talking to freely, Westby quickly backtracked. "No curse. I didn't mean curse." He waved his hands emphatically in front of him. "I just meant you would be strong enough to overlook her directness and find the sweet woman that's inside."

Tavis was intrigued and if he were honest with himself, a little flattered. It wasn't every day that he met someone who had religiously followed his career on the Continent as it seems Lord Westby had. And for him to think that Tavis would suit his daughter...Tavis mulled on that. Westby had said that she was off putting and prone to directness. Maybe it wasn't such a compliment after all to be thought a suitable mate for his daughter. Still, he reasoned, he needed a wife and he needed to get his hands on those documents incriminating his father.

"If I agree to meet your daughter," Tavis paused and Westby perked up, obviously heartened by Tavis's statement, "you would have to guarantee me that upon our marriage, you would hand over any and all paperwork concerning my father, the Third Earl of Stanton."

"Yes, yes," Westby hurried to assure Tavis. "Of course." He smiled a friendly smile, obviously his good humor restored.

"Also, if we were to marry, I would like to discuss including in your daughter's settlement the horses that you took from my stables."

Westby's genial smile instantly disappeared only to be replaced by a stern line of displeasure. "Absolutely not. Those are my horses paid for with your father's note."

Tavis's eyes darkened in anger. "You and I both know that the horseflesh you stole from my stables that day more than repaid the five thousand pounds that my father owed you." His voice shook with barely controlled rage.

Westby leaned in, his eyes narrowed to obsidian slits. "Listen, Stanton. Those horses were exchanged for the note and for the promise that I would not reveal any information about your father until such time as you have married my daughter."

Tavis leaned in too, baring his teeth as he snarled, "It seems, then, that we are at an impasse, Lord Westby, because I shall refuse to meet your daughter unless you agree to my terms."

"Are you forgetting the little matter of your father's unfortunate war time activities?" Tavis felt spittle hit his cheek from Lord Westby's hissed question that had been forced through clenched teeth. With a calm that belied his emotions, Tavis unhurriedly removed his handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped the offending moisture from his cheek. Carefully folding it, he replaced it once again in his pocket.

"Go ahead. Tell everyone." Tavis leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest boldly meeting the still angry glare of Lord Westby. "But when you are brought in and questioned for withholding traitorous materials from the Crown, you very well may be implicated, too."

Tavis could see Westby literally shaking with rage, but he managed to grit out, "Fine. We will discuss the matter of the horses in my daughter's settlement if you agree to marry her."

The two men had eventually shaken on it and Westby, with aristocratic grace, staggered out of White's. Tavis remained nursing his glass of whisky.

"McGuire!" a familiar voice hailed him from across the room. Tavis looked up and spied the jovial continence of his supervising officer, Major-General Wickes. He slid into the chair across from Tavis and signaled the waiter to bring him a drink.

"It's been awhile, Wickes," Tavis greeted his comrade and friend with a smile and a firm handshake. "At least a year."

"I think you're right, McGuire." Wickes thanked the waiter and took a sip. "Ah," he sighed contentedly, "I haven't had a good glass of whisky since coming back from the Continent."

Tavis grimaced into his glass. "And this isn't even particularly good." He downed his drink and signaled for another. "You should taste Scotch whisky. Now that's a smooth drink."

Wickes eyed him speculatively. “I had heard rumors that you returned to Scotland when your brother died.”

“Yes,” Tavis brooded into his newly filled glass. Looking up suddenly from his glass with eyes touched by grief, he intoned sarcastically, “Congratulate me, Wickes. I’m the new Earl of Stanton.” He laughed a sad, bitter sound. “All it took was for my brother to die.”

Raising his glass in mock salute, Wickes said softly, “To you, my friend.” Tactfully changing the subject, Wickes asked nonchalantly over his glass, “Was that Lord Westby I saw you talking to?”

“Hmm? Yes,” Tavis hesitated for a moment. “He had some information about my father he wanted to give me.”

Wickes’s eyes took on a hard glint. “Westby is a pig,” he practically spat. “Do you mind me asking what information he had about your father?”

Tavis hedged. “I’d really rather not talk about it.”

Grabbing his coat, Wickes suggested, “Let’s take a walk, my friend, where there is less noise.” He looked pointedly around the room at the rapidly filling establishment.

The two men exited and walked towards Hyde Park. Once they had walked a fair distance into the park, Wickes began casually, “Let me see if I can guess what you two talked about. Westby approached your brother, or maybe you when you returned home, with an offer of some delicate information in return for your cooperation on a matter of import to him.” Wickes took in Tavis’s chalky pallor and asked, “How am I doing so far?”

Tavis jerked back in sudden surprise, wondering how much his old friend actually knew. Deciding it wasn't worth prevaricating to someone who could sniff out a lie like a hound dog could sniff out a fox, he began woodenly, “It’s true. He approached me with incriminating information about my father, specifically information that detailed illegal war time activities.”

Wickes and Tavis walked in silence while Wickes mulled over this information. Tavis wondered at the lack of surprise Wickes had shown at the information he had just shared. Most officers of Her Majesty’s Royal Army would have strongly objected to anything that smelt of treason, yet Wickes had showed no surprise which made him wonder exactly what Wickes knew.

Eventually he said, “We have suspected Westby of collusion with the enemy for some time.”

Tavis started in surprise. “We?” he queried. “Who is we?”

“You’re not the only one with a new title, Lord Stanton.” Wickes said wryly emphasizing Tavis’s new name. “After returning from the Continent, I was named to the War Office in charge of wartime security.”

Noting that Tavis remained silent, Wickes continued, “Westby has been suspect of passing sensitive documents about troop numbers and

supplies to English citizens in France. These documents were then passed to French sympathizers which have severely jeopardized the safety of thousands of English troops."

"But what does my father have to do with any of this?" Tavis asked in frustration. "If Westby is a suspect, then why is he blackmailing me?"

"We have determined that Westby has a network of civilians he uses to conduct his business." Wickes blew out a frustrated breath. "Which has made it very difficult to pin anything on him." Tavis nodded in understanding, so Wickes continued. "Most of them are peers of the realm, like your father, who owed him a debt. Once the deed is done, usually delivering papers at a designated rendezvous, the debt is considered paid."

"But my father must have died before Westby could collect," Tavis finished, understanding finally dawning.

Wickes nodded. "That's exactly what we think happened, as well. When he approached your brother about the matter of your father's outstanding debt, Westby must have realized that he would not be able to extort your dying brother." Wickes shrugged. "So, he waited for you."

Tavis moved off the path they had been walking on to stand with arms crossed before a small pond. "It doesn't make any sense, though, Wickes. He didn't blackmail me into delivering any papers for him." Tavis snorted and turned his head to look at Wickes standing behind him. "Westby wanted me to marry his chit of a daughter in return for the information about my father." Tavis stooped down and picked up a smooth rock. With a flick of his wrist, Tavis sent the rock skipping across the pond.

Wickes joined Tavis at his spot by the pond. "Tell me what he said." Tavis blinked at Wickes's sudden arrival and by the hard glint Tavis saw in his eyes.

"It's just as I said," Tavis explained. "Westby sent me a letter requesting that we meet to discuss my father's debt. When we actually sat down to discuss it, he said he would forgive the debt if I married his daughter."

"He said nothing else?"

"I did ask him what was wrong with his daughter that he needed to blackmail a peer to marry her," Tavis mused thoughtfully rubbing his chin.

"Did he say why?"

Tavis smiled dryly. "If you are one to believe the semi-drunken ramblings of a suspected traitor, he said that she was 'off putting and direct.'"

"Think, Tavis," Wickes interjected oddly agitated. "Did he say anything else about his daughter, anything that you found odd?"

He stared unseeing into the pond. "He said I could help her break her curse," he murmured absently under his breath. "Silly isn't it?" Tavis asked

Wickes but found his friend rubbing his hands together in excited anticipation.

"What? What is it?" Tavis demanded of Wickes. "Was he right?" he looked at his eager friend with astonishment.

Instead of answering him directly, Wickes patted him heartily on the shoulder. "We need you back, McGuire, for one more mission." The light of battle had entered his old friend's eyes and Tavis could tell he was busily planning away behind those steely, grey eyes.

Tavis shook off Wickes's hand and rubbed his hands through his hair in disbelief. First he was called home to a crumbling estate on the verge of financial ruin. Then, he found out his old man was not just a colossal bastard but likely a traitor to boot. Followed by Westby's thinly veiled proposition and now Wickes's plea for him to run one more mission, Tavis had just about had enough.

He took several deep breaths and reminded himself of how much he owed his friend and former supervising officer, one Major-General Thomas Q. Wickes. On more than one occasion, Wickes's intervention had prevented him from doing something rash and dangerous.

Hell, Tavis snorted inside his head, *without his calm, rational guidance, I would still be digging latrines instead of having become a decorated war hero.* Tavis began pacing as he argued with himself on the potential merits versus potential dangers of a proposed mission from the War Office. Finally, he stopped and thought, *You trust him with your life, no?* Tavis exhaled a breath he didn't know he had been holding and walked back to Wickes.

"What would you have me do, man?"

A strange light entered Wickes's eyes as he said in all seriousness, "We want you to do as Westby said. Marry the chit."

Chapter 5

THE sound of approaching footsteps shook Tavis out of his musings. Not wanting to be found just yet, he quickly extinguished his cigar and retreated further into the shadows on the far side of the barn.

"Oof!" a loud female voice screeched into his ear. As Tavis braced his arms against his unknown visitor to steady himself, he felt a small foot come dangerously close to emasculating him. He doubled over and gritted out, "You little minx!"

Tavis's hold on the spitting female weakened due to the intense pain he was now feeling below the belt. Not wanting to truly become a eunuch, a distinct possibility the way this hellcat was twisting about, Tavis lurched forward pushing the woman to the ground. Using the strength and width of his body, he braced her fall before quickly rolling her over, so she became pinned under his impressive height and weight.

"Get off me!" she screeched again. One of her waving arms managed to clip him under the chin knocking his teeth together. Tavis swore he saw stars.

"Damn it woman," he grit out through the pain in his jaw. "Keep still!"

But the woman under him was incensed, flailing her arms and legs in a desperate attempt to escape making his task that much more difficult. Spitting out several choice words, Tavis grabbed the wildly swinging limbs of the enraged hellcat beneath him and pinned her arms above her head. Her legs were trapped under his weight, and now her arms were, too. Instantly she stilled.

"Wh-what are you going to do to me?" she whispered. He heard the nervous tremor in her voice and cursed himself for being so rough.

"Nothing, lass," he sighed. "Just hold still until the stars stop spinning around my head."

She remained motionless under him as Tavis pushed back the pounding ache in his head. At least she could listen, he thought. Now that she wasn't thrashing around, he finally got a good look at her. Frightened green eyes framed by the longest, blackest lashes he had ever seen on any woman stared back at him. He took a moment to admire her smooth, creamy skin that glowed in the soft light that bathed her from the moon. Ropes of red-blonde curls spilled in a glorious tangle around her head, obviously messed in their tussle. Finally, Tavis looked down at her lips. Full, red and slightly parted, he groaned inwardly when he saw her small, red tongue dart out and wet her lower lip.

"Who-who are you?" she whispered.

"Ah, forgive my rudeness, my Lady," Tavis grinned cheekily. He took one of the woman's imprisoned hands and brought it up to his lips for a gentle kiss.

He felt the lady shiver and heard her suck in a breath. “Tavis McGuire, my lady, at your most devoted service.” Seeing that she wasn’t protesting his liberties, he maintained possession of her hand keeping it close to his chest while he began to gently rub the back of it with his thumb. “And you are…?”

Green eyes flashed at him in anger. “Lady Amelia. My family is nearby and shall notice if I have gone missing.” She had started to squirm again in an attempt to escape. “You will release me at once, or I shall..I shall scream!”

Tavis was fully feeling the effects of all of her squirming, and in an effort to maintain control, he re-imprisoned both of her hands, but this time under has broad chest. Then, he lowered one of his massive hands over her mouth and glared at her. “You will be quiet, woman, or you will not be released.” Her eyes grew wide in fright. “Do you understand me? She nodded her head rapidly.

Slowly, he removed his hand from her mouth. He saw that she kept it firmly closed, though her lips trembled as if she were about to cry.

“Good girl.” He patted her head, a move sure to rile her anger because he hated seeing that spark of fear in her eyes. Especially since he knew he had put it there. In truth, he’d rather she be spitting angry like she had been when they had wrestled earlier than this fearful, obedient woman he now held under him.

“There’s a good lassie,” he crooned for good measure. Her eyes narrowed until they were tiny slits. Oh, he had riled her up alright.

“I’m not a dog, Mr. McGuire,” Amelia hissed in a whisper, “so kindly do not speak to me like one.”

He chuckled, a deep masculine sound that vibrated through his chest. “I never said you were, my lady, and I apologize if I gave that impression.” Aside from her hissed reprimand, Lady Amelia had remained silent.

Tavis stared intently into her eyes. “I am going to slowly remove my weight from your body and I want your word that once your arms and legs are free that you won’t start swinging them at me again. You damn near emasculated me with that first kick, lass.”

Slowly, he braced his arms on either side of Lady Amelia and raised himself on to his knees. Then when he was sure that she had no intentions of finishing the job she had started earlier, he rocked back onto his heels and sprang up.

His head still reeled from where she had swiped it, and by the time he had regained his bearings, Lady Amelia had already stood up and rounded the corner into the stable. When he entered through the stable doors, she had a pitchfork in hand and was pointing it threateningly at his chest.

Tavis sucked in a breath. Lady Amelia was quite simply stunning. He had already guessed that Lady Amelia was a beauty by the brief glimpses he

had of her moon lit face, and he had a pretty good idea of what the rest of her looked like too, based on what he felt while lying atop her, (only a eunuch could have ignored those lush, warm curves, and even if she had tried to make him one, he was no damn eunuch. Yet.).

She was taller than most women, but not tall enough to reach Tavis's shoulders, he guessed. The ample curves he could only guess at before were fully displayed for his hungry eyes. Each curve was lovingly hugged in the form fitting blue silk ball gown she wore. *And her breasts. God,* he thought reverently, *must have given the most perfect breasts to this woman.*

They were full, and creamy, deliciously spilling over her bodice...Tavis's mind quite simply blanked for a moment while he marveled at humankind's most perfect breasts. He loved how they moved while her chest heaved...heaved? Tavis managed to tear his eyes away to look up into the spitting eyes of a very irritated woman who had just caught him ogling her breasts. *Oh,* he remembered dimly, *that's right. The pitchfork.*

He backed up with his hands extended in front of him. "Lass," he began, then started again. "Lady Amelia, I am sorry for scaring you. We just had a little misunderstanding over there. I never meant to hurt you." Tears glistened in her mossy green eyes threatening to spill over on her rosy cheeks. Tavis groaned. *Sweet Mary! Did I just think that??* He groaned again. *One look at her comely face and I am turning into a damn poet!*

She jabbed the pitchfork in his direction again. "What are you doing here? I don't recognize you." Her voice wobbled as she fought for control of her rioting emotions. "If you were a guest, you would have no need to stable your own horses; you would have had a groom do that for you." She circled him until he was pressed flat against the stable wall between a stall and a pile of hay. "And if you were an employee at the stables here you would know the most important rule when working with the horses."

He was impressed. When confronted with an unknown person, she had fought instead of fleeing. She had also deduced that he was an outsider, even if she hadn't quite figured out who he was exactly. And while he was busy ogling her (and, his conscious argued, attempting to calm her down), she had managed to maneuver him neatly into a corner.

Pretending a casualness that he didn't feel with a pitchfork aimed at his chest, he calmly asked, "And what rule is that?"

Her eyes lit with triumph as he essentially confessed to not being employed by the stables here. "The first rule that is taught to all new groomsmen and stable hands is that no one smokes around the horses." Amelia jabbed again, but this time Tavis was prepared. When she thrust, he reached out and grabbed her by the upper arm, and then used his other hand to pull the pitchfork out of her hands and to toss it far from them.

HE had not released her; instead, he had wrapped his beefy arms around her and pulled her close to his body. She immediately began to struggle in his grasp. *Oh, Lord!* Amelia fretted. *If she were caught in this man's arms, Amelia and her family would surely be embroiled in a huge scandal.* Her reputation would be destroyed and she would be a spinster for

the rest of her life. Looking into his eyes with wide-eyed fright, she desperately tried to convey that to him, but the words would not form.

"No one is here but the two of us," he reassured her, "and if I hear someone coming, I'll make sure to disappear." He smiled encouragingly, his eyes kind, yet firm. Amelia soon realized that she would not escape his embrace. She ceased struggling but remained wary, closely eyeing him to judge his intentions. It wasn't until he tucked her head under his chin and gently smoothed his hand along her hair saying, "Shh, lass. I've got you," that Amelia's thinly held control on her emotions finally broke.

Amelia's shoulders started shaking, and the tears she had held onto came pouring out while she stayed anchored in the comforting embrace of Tavis McGuire. What a night! It was bad enough that she had been ambushed by Jeremy and then manipulated by her mother, but to be attacked, manhandled, and then ogled by Tavis McGuire, was just too much. Any dignity she had left after this evening had begun, came pouring out of her eyes and onto his shirt. And in the stables, no less. Through it all, he remained quiet and comforting, a solid rock through the storm of her emotions.

Her tears spent, Amelia eventually calmed under the soothing caresses of Tavis's ministrations.

For such a big man, he certainly is gentle. She mulled on this information while she blushingly remembered her first glance of Tavis McGuire. In the dark it had been too difficult to make out the finer features of his face or figure. All she really saw was a dark, looming shape. Then when he had been on top of her (Amelia blushed redder remembering what she had felt during *that*), all she could make out was that he was big and very muscled. She remembered the feel of his strong hands grasping her arms and sighed.

"What's that lass? Did you say something?" Tavis queried, his big hand pausing in the middle of her back.

Too embarrassed to meet his eyes yet, she shook her head no and kept her head firmly on his chest. He continued stroking her hair, taking a few silky strands at a time to twirl around his finger. Amelia was at once mortally embarrassed and peacefully contented. It was odd, these contrasting emotions she felt. It was strikingly similar to the person who called himself Tavis McGuire.

A good head taller than her own father, this man absolutely towered over her. When she saw him in the light of the stables for the first time, she had almost dropped her pitchfork, silly hen that she was, because he was so tall. And massive across the chest and shoulders. She knew many men who would have used their size to intimidate and coerce women into doing what they wanted. Yet aside from her initial fright when the two ran into each other and her instincts to defend had kicked in, she had never truly felt in danger from him in spite of his size.

His face was not conventionally handsome due to the imposing sharp angles of his cheeks and nose, but when he smiled, those sharp angles softened and gave his face a less severe mien. While everything else about

him--from his impressive height, rugged appearance and obvious strength--screamed masculinity, his eyes, a startling sapphire blue, made him seem less imposing and more approachable.

Oooh, and his hair! She remembered the silky feel of it as it had caressed her cheek when he leaned over her. He kept it longer than was fashionable, and it curled slightly where it touched his jacket collar. In the light from the lanterns in the stable, she could now see that it was a deep brown streaked with red. Amelia shivered at the memory.

He must have felt it for his embrace tightened, and he asked in a gruff voice near to her ear, "Are ye cold, then, my lady?" His voice had taken on a different timbre that curled her toes when it tickled the side of her face. She could also swear he spoke with a faint brogue.

Amelia stiffened, deciding that it was time to end this pleasant and highly compromising embrace. "No, Mr. McGuire, but I think you should release me please." Tavis, sensing her return to formality, dropped his arms from around her body and stepped back.

Immediately, Amelia missed his warmth. She crossed her arms unconsciously around her sides to warm herself, and though it embarrassed her to do so, Amelia managed to compose herself long enough to look Tavis in the eye. "I thank you for your comfort while I was distressed. I now realize that you did not intend to manhandle me in such a manner before and would ask your forgiveness for my part in our altercation."

He seemed uncomfortable too. His face was flushed a dull red, and he kept pulling his shirt away from his neck, almost like his cravat had been tied too tightly. Despite his obvious discomfort, he managed a soft chuckle at her words. "Are you referring to when you almost unmanned me or when you hit my head hard enough to make me see stars?"

She squirmed and answered primly, "Both."

"I forgive you as long as you promise to never do that to a man again."

"What?" Amelia asked hotly, hands on her hips in irritation. "Defend myself?"

Tavis found a bench on the side of one of the stalls and he sank down on to it. "Calm down, my lady," he said amusedly. "No, a lass should be able to defend herself if needed. I just meant the unmanning bit." He patted a spot next to him on the bench, indicating that Amelia should join him. "Where did you learn that anyway? Do they teach that to young misses at finishing school?"

"My sister taught me it." Amelia flushed again. Then she moved to sit by Tavis. "And no, I did not learn that at finishing school." Her eyes twinkled in mischief." I imagine that if they had taught a course in "How to Unman a Gentleman in Five Simple Moves," they would have lost all of their pupils when irate parents found out."

She looked slyly at Tavis out of the corner of her eye. “Of course for you, it only took two moves.”

“I’ll have you know, my lady, that if you hadn’t first kicked me in the...er, where you kicked me, it would have taken at least five moves for you to unman me.” He looked so affronted that she couldn't help but laugh. Soon, he had joined in, and their mutual laughter helped to erase the unease and tension of their accidental first meeting.

Amelia hazarded a glance at Tavis out of the corner of her eyes. *He really is a handsome man, especially when he laughs.* She chewed on her bottom lip in thought. *But who was he?* she wondered. Even through the haze of fatigue that was settling over her body and the maelstrom of emotions she had experienced this evening, she was still enough in charge of her senses to maintain her suspicions about Mr. Tavis McGuire.

“So, Mr. McGuire,” Amelia began, “who exactly are you, and what are you doing in the stables alone at this time of night?” Her eyebrows rose, and she stared down her nose at him in what she hoped was a close approximation of her mother’s no-nonsense look.

He pretended to ponder her query for several moments before answering. “How about if I tell you why I am here in the stables, you tell me what you are doing here.” He waggled his eyebrows and lowered his voice. “Alone and at this time of night.”

“What exactly are you implying, Mr. McGuire?” Her eyes flashed with green fire, and she could feel herself growing warm at his accusation. She jumped up from her perch on the bench and stood in front of him where he remained seated. With hands on her hips, she continued her tirade. “Are you saying that I came down here alone so I could conduct some sort of illicit assignation?” As she spoke, she punctuated each word with a poke to his chest.

He easily grabbed her fingers mid-poke and commented mildly, “I guess it’s true what they say about red-heads having a foul temper. That’s twice you’ve nearly taken my head off for asking a simple question.”

She wrenched her fingers free from his grasp and yelled, “I don’t have a foul temper, you big cack-headed buffoon!” He merely continued to sit there, regarding her with wry amusement until she realized what she had just said.

Straightening her skirts, she desperately tried to control her raging temper. “Ahem, that is to say, I don’t usually have a foul temper.” He looked at her doubtfully. “You,” she continued primly, “have succeeded in bringing out the worst in me, that’s all.”

Easily recapturing her hand, he pulled her down to sit by him once again. “Then I beg your pardon, my lady. I meant no insult.” He began running his thumb along the underside of her wrist by her pulse.

Amelia snatched her hand back and mumbled her own apologies. “You’re right, Mr. McGuire. I do seem to be ill tempered this evening, and I

beg your forgiveness." She then turned her head away from the all too-knowing eyes of Tavis McGuire in embarrassment. *How many times must I apologize to this man?* she wondered.

"Why do you suppose that is?" he asked absently.

"I imagine," she replied pertly, "that it has something to do with being accosted outside my father's stables by persons unknown." Eyeing him with obvious displeasure, she took her leave of the bench and walked over to the stable door to look up at the night sky.

"Your father's stables?" She whirled around startled by his sudden nearness and found herself trapped between a wall and a very tall, very dangerous looking man. True, he had spoken casually, almost as if he didn't care, but Amelia had heard an underlying tone in his voice, one she couldn't quite identify.

She gulped and then looked up. He was so tall that she had to crane her neck to look him in the eyes. What she saw caused a shiver to run up her spine. Those bright blue eyes that had sparkled with laughter moments earlier were now shadowed by heavy lids, and some indiscernible emotion brewed in their gleaming depths.

"Y-yes," she stammered. "That's why I came down here, so I could see my horse in my father's stables." Amelia gestured vaguely down the hall of stalls where her horse was stabled. Still, he remained silently towering over her and intently peering into her face.

He was so close to her now she could see that Tavis had a small scar above his left eyebrow. It was no longer than an inch, but it had left a silvery trace that only added to his rugged good looks. His warm breath fanned her cheeks and sent pleasant tingles down her spine. Unlike the last time she had been cornered by a man, Tavis's breath was spicy-sweet and smelled faintly of the cigar he had just smoked. Then he lowered his face until he was eye level with Amelia. Darting her tongue out to wet her lips, she watched as his eyes darkened further. Amelia vaguely realized, *He's going to kiss me.* Far from being alarmed, a heated anticipation hummed through her veins and curled tightly in her belly. On their own volition, her eyes began to close and she unconsciously leaned towards him.

OH, God! Tavis groaned silently as he watched Amelia's captivating eyes disappear behind delicate, blue-veined eyelids. *She's Westby's daughter!* When Amelia told him that she had left the ball to visit her father's stable, a cold ball of dread formed in the pit of his stomach because he knew which daughter she had to be.

He reasoned that the youngest would be with her betrothed because after all, the ball was being held in their honor. Also he remembered Meeks telling him that she was a petite fey-like creature with delicate features and fine, white-blonde hair. That eliminated the woman before him as the youngest. The ample landscape of her curves would never qualify her as 'fairy like.'

No, he thought looking at Amelia in admiration. She was more like a

siren, luring men to the promise of heaven with the sway of her wide hips and the temptation of ripe breasts just ready for plucking.

She can't be the eldest, Tavis rationalized through a hazy fog of lust, gazing at Amelia's thick red hair that had curled down and around her shoulders. The eldest, he vaguely recollected, was a stunning blonde. When he first came to Town, they had been introduced over a cutthroat game of cards. She had ice blue eyes, he remembered, and they had been shrewd and cunning with a hard edge to them.

Amelia's eyes, though, were the rich green of a field, newly carpeted in the springtime. Tavis drew in a deep breath and then blew it out. Therefore, this delectable woman he had been lusting after in the stables must be the middle daughter, Lady Amelia Westby, the woman he was supposed to meet in less than a half hour.

Why hadn't Meeks told him that the middle daughter was a stunning red-haired lass with curves to make a man weep? As far as Tavis could recall, all Meeks had mentioned about the middle daughter was that she had a waspish tongue and was reasonably handsome. Looking at Amelia, there were plenty of details that Meeks had obviously left out, and through the fog of lust clouding his brain, he wondered why.

He groaned again, and all thoughts of Meeks flew out of his head as she swayed closer to him. Now her full curves were lightly pressed against the hard planes of his body.

He snorted. *No, not hard. Throbbing is more like it.* Two delicate hands crept their way up his chest and rested softly there. One finger caressed the soft linen of his shirt, and he watched it as it moved lazily over the fabric in a tiny circles. *And becoming more so by the minute.* He gritted his teeth and steeled his muscles in a desperate attempt to resist the innocent temptation before him.

This is not how tonight was supposed to have gone! he thought desperately. *Remember the mission!* Right, Tavis shook his head to clear it. *The mission.* Meet the girl to appease Westby. Break into the study to search for papers on his father and any other papers implicating Westby. Steal the horses that Westby had taken from him (That was not included in his mission, but Tavis reasoned that he was owed something for his service to his country). Leave. That was the mission. Looking at Amelia's tempting lips before him, Tavis cursed the infernal mission because unfortunately, it left no room for late night dalliances in the stable. Had he known that this was what was waiting for him, he might not have been so reluctant to take the mission.

Now her hands had found their way up his shoulders and around his neck. They were currently playing with the curls at the back of his neck. She had used the leverage she had gained by holding onto his neck to pull her body flush with his, which, he eagerly admitted, was rapidly undermining the merits of his blasted mission.

Damn Westby for the snake that he is! Tavis cursed inwardly. I should have run him through when I had the chance.

"Tavis?" Amelia's velvety voice wrapped around him pulling him out of his dark musings. She opened those cat-like eyes and regarded him dreamily, desire sparkling in the emerald depths. "Is something wrong?"

He could see desire being quickly replaced by confusion and embarrassment. She attempted to pull away, but Tavis snaked his arms around her waist and held her fast to him. Bending his head, he nuzzled her neck gently with his nose.

"No, *mo ghrádh*," he said lifting his head to smile gently into her eyes, "I was just stunned by your beauty."

"Tavis…" she demurred blushing a lovely shade of pink.

"It's true," he nodded earnestly, then looked at her in surprise. "No man has told you that before?"

She lowered her head and shook it no. With the utmost care, he cupped her chin with his hand and raised her head. "Men in England must be blind," he whispered. "Because you surely are the prettiest lass this side of Scotland." Her eyes widened and he heard her quick indrawn breath of surprise.

He took a blunt finger and stroked her cheek. "You have such fine skin, soft as silk and the color of fresh cream." He lightly tapped the end of her nose with his finger. "Except for when you blush. Then you turn a lovely shade of pink." She laughed, a breathless nervous sound, then peeked at him shyly from beneath her lashes. "And your eyes…" His fingers traced a delicately arched eyebrow. "They are so expressive; they show everything you think or feel." He bent closer so his forehead rested lightly against hers. "A man could lose himself in your eyes," he murmured.

"Dance with me, Amelia." She looked questioningly at him. He hadn't lied about her eyes. They did show everything she felt. He could tell his request had startled her. There was a little disappointment, too, perhaps at the lost kiss he hoped vainly, but there was also something else. Anticipation.

Tavis grinned a slow, seductive smile as he unwrapped Amelia's hands from around his neck. One hand he laced with his, keeping it pressed close to his heart and the other he raised to his lips. He placed gentle kisses on her palm and the inside of her wrist. "Dance with me, Amelia," he urged again. "Let me hold you under the stars."

Wordlessly, she nodded, allowing him to lead her into the moonlight waiting just outside the stable doors.

Chapter 6

HIGH in the sky, the moon bathed the grounds with its muted light. Tavis expertly led Amelia to an open clearing not fifty feet from the stable door. At this location, the music from the ball could be heard loudly enough to dance to. The liquid strains of a waltz floated on the air to Tavis and Amelia.

"Now this is a setting worthy of a dance." He motioned expansively around the small clearing that was bordered by a ring of towering oaks and fragrant fruit trees. The exotic smell of gardenia drifted down from the greenhouse and its heady fragrance permeated the clearing. A small breeze rustled the grass and blew strands of Amelia's curls on to her cheeks. She absently brushed them away, too overwhelmed by new sensations to truly take note of her surroundings.

She looked up at him curiously afraid to speak lest the spell of the past few moments be broken. He must have felt it too, because he simply stared at her for several heartbeats before flashing her an endearing lopsided grin. "With the moonlight to guide us and the stars to accent your beauty, no ballroom could ever compare." He gave a courtly bow and offered her his hand. "My lady?" She curtsied and put her hand in his. With a triumphant smile, he gathered her up into his arms and led her expertly around the clearing.

Dancing with Tavis is like dancing on a cloud, Amelia thought dreamily. For such a big man, he was light on his feet. He held her firmly in his embrace, the strength of his arms gently guiding her in the intricate steps of the waltz. Though several inches separated them, as deemed proper by society, she could feel the shifting muscles of his legs through the layers of her skirt. Also, dark as it was, she could still make out the glittering intensity of his eyes, which she noticed breathlessly, were trained on her with a force that left her light headed.

Amelia's arms broke out into goose flesh. She always had wondered what it would be like to be the sole focus of someone as intensely masculine as Tavis. Now she knew. It was like being bathed in the summer sun--at first your skin warms from the gentle rays that kiss it tenderly, but the longer you are out in the sun, the more danger there is to burn. Too *much time with Tavis and I will easily be burned*, she thought wryly, *especially when his very touch sets me aflame.*

Though Tavis had never indicated in either word or deed that he was anything less than a gentleman, Amelia could feel the unleashed power humming just under his smooth façade. She strongly suspected that Tavis McGuire could burn her quite badly indeed.

He intrigued her as no other man had before, and, if she were being honest with herself, she was intensely attracted to him. Blushing at the remembrance of her wanton behavior in the stables, Amelia knew that had he not stopped her, she would have willingly kissed him.

Amelia sighed briefly. She had been disappointed that he hadn't kissed her even if he had shown more restraint and more care for her reputation than she in not doing so. Because in his arms, she would have

tossed aside twenty years of carefully bred propriety for one kiss from this man.

She sighed again. *And more*. Though she was still a maid, she did understand what happened between a man and a woman. Bea made sure of that, Amelia giggled to herself remembering that particularly embarrassing (and enlightening) conversation shortly after Beatrice had wed.

"You need to be prepared, Mimi," Bea had said. "Our mother did nothing to prepare me for my wedding night, and it was unpleasant." Bea's nose wrinkled slightly in distaste. "Had she told me anything about what was to happen or how I could make it more pleasurable, it could have been better." She thought for a minute and then revised her statement. "Well, it could have been less painful at least."

Then Beatrice had described in excruciating detail exactly what to expect. At first, Amelia had been too shocked and embarrassed to think about that aspect of a marriage, but looking at Tavis, Amelia knew in her heart that if Tavis were hers, she would let him do all that Beatrice had described and more.

Which brings us back to why Tavis doesn't want to kiss me, Amelia wondered curiously. If she had read the situation correctly, and based on Bea's detailed analysis of the male libido she was fairly certain she had, Tavis had wanted to kiss her as much as she had wanted to be kissed. So why had he stopped?

She must have sighed again because Tavis's warm, husky voice filled her ear. "What thoughts have you sighing so, my lady?"

Amelia snapped out of her lust-filled thoughts and blushed bright red. Unfortunately, without time to prepare herself, she blurted out, "I was wondering why you didn't kiss me in the stables."

"Ah, uh, that is to say…" Tavis stammered and faltered on his footing, the first stumble in their otherwise perfect dance. He quickly regained the rhythm of the dance and had easily resumed the steps when Amelia peeked up at him through her lashes. She could see his brows furrowing in what appeared to be deep concentration.

"I did want to kiss you, my lady," he said carefully, "However, I did not want to compromise you. You are a lady, and I am a gentleman." He cleared his throat, regretting his formal manner of speaking however necessary it was to his mission. "There are rules." *God,* he moaned*, I sound like such a prig!*

He almost, *almost,* laughed at her crestfallen expression and pouting lips, but since his own emotions mirrored hers in desperately wanting a kiss, he didn't much feel like laughing at the moment.

The music from the house stopped, and Tavis ended their dance on a graceful twirl. Bowing over her hand, he kissed it and looked up into Amelia's eyes. "Our waltz has ended," he said sadly. When she didn't respond, he added gently, "It approaches midnight, my lady."

Her eyes snapped to attention from whatever thoughts had been occupying her mind. “What?” she squeaked out frantically scanning the clearing and the house beyond. “Midnight?”

“Yes, I’m afraid it’s time to say good-bye. Someone must be looking for you.”

“Why would you say that?” She stilled, and Tavis wondered at the emotions he saw playing across her face.

He closed the distance between the two of them until they were once again face to face. “Because if you were mine and I couldn’t find you,” he said possessively his burr richening his already deep voice, “I would have torn the house and grounds apart until I had you in my arms again.”

“But I don’t want to say good-bye,” Amelia's whispered entreaty wove a web of seduction around Tavis.

Tavis was tempted, more than he could say, and not for the first time this evening he railed at the vagaries of fate that had brought this woman to him now. If only, he thought. If only Meeks had located the information needed to complete his mission before tonight. He would have taken the papers to the War Office, completed his mission and been on his way to his life at Ballywith. *Never having met Amelia*, he mused. That thought didn’t sit well with Tavis, so he pushed it aside and instead, contemplated what he now must do.

Since no information had been found after six weeks of searching, now he had to go with Wickes’s ill-conceived plan to meet the girl per Westby’s instruction. To feel such intense attraction for this woman, the woman he needed to use to bring down her traitorous father, was like a slap in the face after everything he had endured in the last several months. He would woo her to gain the information he needed, and in the end he would lose her trust when he eventually would have to betray her.

But maybe, he thought wildly, a new idea forming amidst the confusion of his muddled emotions, *maybe there is another way.*

Even though the idea was half-formed in Tavis’s whirling mind, he still stunned himself by saying, “Run away with me, then, Amelia.”

“What?” she stuttered backing away from Tavis. He couldn’t tell who was more shocked. Him or her. “We hardly know each other!”

“Many marriages begin on less,” Tavis persuaded crossing his arms over his chest.

“I don’t even know who you are!” she countered, a slight tremor betraying her unease. “You could be anybody!”

He stalked over to where she stood, her head turned to the side and eyes closed. “I could be anybody, ‘tis true, lass,” Then grabbing her chin firmly between his fingers, he forced her to look at him. “But I also could be somebody, Amelia,” he said roughly. “Somebody you could care for.

Somebody you could marry."

She jerked her head away and just stared at him with her green eyes shrouded in mystery. He could not see a yes or a no in their fathomless depths.

He continued on, relentless in his pursuit of Amelia's answer. He could lie to himself and say his need to hear her declare her affections for him was for the mission, but this need he had ran deeper than that, and it downright scared him. "Run away with me, Amelia *mia*," he whispered his face looming over hers. He dropped a kiss on her forehead on the likely chance that this would be their last meeting. "Come away with me tonight and be my wife."

Suddenly, her body jerked, as though it had been rudely awakened from a dream. She opened her mouth, but no words formed. Instead, she shook her head as her eyes filled with tears. Gathering the hems of her skirts, Amelia ran from the clearing back to the lights of the house.

Tavis let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding and wearily ran his fingers through his hair. Then, pulling out his pocket watch, he saw that it was five minutes to midnight. He had time.

Since his informant Meeks had proved useless, he would search the house himself, Tavis decided, cementing his new plan in his mind. Somewhere between meeting Amelia and asking her to marry him, Tavis realized that he could never use her and betray her trust, no matter what was at stake. His new plan would avoid that.

In less than five minutes, Westby would be waiting for him in the ballroom, and the man's study, the most likely location to look for the information he needed, would be empty. Tavis would find what he needed to complete his mission, so he could return home to begin his life of comfort and ease. Lady Amelia would be safe, and he would just forget her. Yes, it was a brilliant plan.

"Then why is it," he said to himself as he watched Amelia run away from him to the safety of the lights within her home, "that I feel like I've just made a terrible mistake?"

AMELIA entered the house and quickly made her way to the card room where her sister had said she would be. Most of the dancers had already quit the floor for dinner, so the ballroom was easier to navigate than it had been earlier in the evening.

She entered the room with some haste, repeating, "Bea. Bea. Bea. Bea," rapidly under her breath. Easily spying her sister's blond head amidst the darker hues of the card dandies who surrounded her, Amelia interrupted her sister's game.

"Bea," she whispered urgently. "I need to talk to you. Now."

"Darling," Bea intoned in her melodious voice, "can't you see that I'm in the middle of a game?" She gestured expansively to the table and the

surrounding players.

Amelia huffed out an impatient sigh before she glanced quickly at her sister's cards. "What are you playing?"

"Loo." Bea rolled her eyes dramatically at the interested looks she and her sister were receiving from the other players.

"Trump?" Amelia asked impatiently. She studied the table with keen eyes and quickly surmised that her sister easily had this game won. Like usual, though, Bea was toying with the other players much like a cat with a mouse right before it swallowed the mouse whole. Bea was like that sometimes.

"Spades," Beatrice replied with a suspicious narrowing of her eyes.

Amelia pulled out the top three trump cards of her sister's hand and laid them on the table.

"Anyone else have trump to beat that?" Amelia quizzed the befuddled card players at her sister's game, some of whom were being to mutter in irritation.

"Anyone?" she repeated. "Good." Amelia started scooping up Bea's winnings that were strewn across the table and threw them into her sister's ridiculously tiny reticule. "Bea is done for now, boys." Then grabbing her sister by the hand, Amelia dragged Beatrice out of the card room and down the hallway firmly ignoring the muffled shouts of disgruntlement from the card room.

"Will you tell me what is going on?" Bea struggled in Amelia's grasp and managed to successfully pull her hand free from her sister's surprisingly tight grip.

Beatrice had stopped in the middle of the empty hallway, her blue eyes flashing in irritation at Amelia. They turned quickly to surprise as she assessed Amelia's appearance. Self-consciously, Amelia patted her hair in a desperate attempt to secure it into some semblance of what it had been earlier that evening before...she gulped. *Before I met Tavis*.

Walking away from him had been one of the hardest things she had ever had to do. She came alive in his presence and felt desirable when she was with him. Usually she was bored to tears with the men of the ton. Most were coerced by her father into talking to her, so invariably they were boring feeling that they were doing her a favor by deigning to speak with her. *Or*, she thought ruefully, *they were her sister's discarded suitors seeking a way to gain favor once more with Queen Bea through me.*

Over time she started to believe that she was a cold, unwanted spinster who was a mere shadow compared to the twin flames that were her two sisters. She had always felt too big and awkward next to them, and too unconventional looking to be truly pretty.

When Tavis looked at her in that way he had, though, Amelia forgot

all of that. Tavis liked the way she appeared. He had said so, and for some reason, Amelia believed him. She felt attractive and desirable, especially when she saw how Tavis regarded her, like she was a honey ham displayed in the middle of a delicious buffet, and he just couldn't wait to begin eating.

Aside from her physical reaction to him, which she had to admit was quite strong, he was a true gentleman--thoughtful, solicitous and kind. Barring his actions during their initial meeting, he had behaved with far more decorum than she herself had. And he was content to be with her without asking millions of impolite questions. In their short time together, he appeared to be the perfect man, and she had walked away from it. *No,* she thought sadly, *ran away from.*

If you were mine, he had said in that rumbly voice of his. Amelia shivered in remembrance. Oh, if only I were his, Amelia railed silently. But most likely, he was a poor untitled second son with no prospects. *Mother and father would never agree to such a match*, she thought glumly.

She was interrupted by her sister's shrill voice demanding incredulously, "What happened to you?" Just look at your hair! It's completely come undone." Beatrice came forward and shooed Amelia's fluttering hands out of the way. Smoothing the wayward strands together with her hands, Beatrice swiftly twisted Amelia's hair up into a reasonably acceptable coiffure and pinned it with the remaining pins left in the tangled red masses of Amelia's once stylish hair.

Circling Amelia with a critical eye, Beatrice assessed Amelia's costume. "Why are there wrinkles on your dress? And are those," Beatrice paused dramatically as she looked at her sister in shocked amazement, "are those grass stains on the back of your gown?" Bea whispered in awe. "Amelia Jane Westby what have you been up to?"

"Oh, Bea!" Amelia cried throwing herself into her sister's arms. "I don't know what to do!"

Amelia held on to her sister, quietly crying into her sister's embrace. Beatrice awkwardly patted her on the back, *Most likely unfamiliar with emotional outbursts from me,* Amelia realized vaguely.

"There, there," Bea soothed, a note of near panic in her normally cool, cultured voice. Her tears somewhat quieted, Amelia straightened and caught a glimpse of a familiar pink shape hurrying rapidly through the hallway.

"Clarisse," Amelia warbled. Clarisse immediately put her arms around her distraught friend and looked accusingly at Beatrice. "What did you do to her?" she demanded.

Bea shrugged helplessly. "Me? I didn't do anything! This lunatic," Bea jabbed a finger in Amelia's direction, "attacked me at the tables, pulled me away from the middle of a card game, that I could have won by myself, thank you very much, Amelia, and dragged me down the hall!" She put her hands on her hips and glared at Clarisse who was still comforting Amelia. "Then, when I found her disheveled, I did my best to help repair her hair and costume. And after all that, she throws herself into my arms and starts

crying!" Bea ended her tirade on a huff.

Clarisse nodded in sympathy. "I heard about the ruckus you caused during the card game just as I was going in to dinner, so I rushed out to find you two." She squeezed Amelia in a comforting hug. "Are you going to tell us what happened, Mimi?"

Amelia had since stopped her crying and realized just how crazily she had been acting. Gratefully taking the handkerchief Clarisse offered her, Amelia wiped her eyes and announced, "We need to find some place private where we can talk."

Beatrice and Clarisse shared a look over Amelia's head, but they both nodded in agreement. "Come on," Bea said grimly grabbing on to Amelia's hand. "I know just the place."

Chapter 7

HAVING uncovered nothing in Lord Westby's study, Tavis gave up his futile search. Though he had looked for hidden compartments in the desk and in the wall, he was unable to find anything. He was just about to start prying apart the floorboards when he heard someone approaching the main door of the study. Using the side door, Tavis slipped out into the adjoining library and then into the main hallway only to be greeted by the officious Lord Westby.

"Lord Stanton!" boomed the familiar voice of Lord Westby. "How good of you to come to our little soirée!" He pumped Tavis's hand in an enthusiastic greeting, squeezing just a little too hard. "I was afraid you weren't coming," he said with a hard edge to his voice. Tavis didn't mistake his meaning.

"Yes, yes," Tavis replied easily. "I became lost, I'm afraid, in the maze of rooms in your house." He flashed him a cool smile. "But, I'm here as requested, Westby." The two men made their way into the ballroom, and Tavis scanned the room looking for a glimpse of Amelia's bright red hair amidst the remaining guests who had not yet gone in for dinner.

"Is she here?" he demanded, turning to address Westby who had moved off slightly to take the arm of an attractive blonde woman, presumably Westby's wife.

The lady, a petite creature of middling years and regal bearing, regarded him with a frank gaze, startling not for its intensity but because it was the same green he had so admired earlier this evening in the eyes of one Lady Amelia Westby.

Westby cleared his throat and announced, "I would like to present to you my wife, Lady Westby." The lady curtsied, and Tavis bowed murmuring a subdued greeting to the woman whose daughter he had been imagining in many compromising positions.

"We are so pleased that you could join us this evening," Lady Westby cooed holding out her hand for Tavis to kiss. Tavis took the proffered hand and bestowed a perfunctory kiss over her knuckles. She fluttered her lashes coquettishly and simpered, an action that made Tavis inwardly shudder. Here was someone, despite her mature beauty, who was trying desperately to hold on to her youth, thought Tavis. And failing.

"How could I refuse such an offer?" Tavis said genially. "I admit I was reluctant at first. Your husband practically had to blackmail me into coming." He hazarded a sly glance at Westby's face which had begun to redden. Westby spluttered making odd choking noises, but Tavis smoothly interrupted, "Of course, what gentleman relishes the imminent end of his carefree bachelor days?" Tavis smiled endearingly at Lady Westby who had started to pat her husband gently on the back.

"Yes, I suppose you're right, my lord," she said distractedly. Lady Westby valiantly tried to soothe her agitated husband, though she appeared at a loss for his sudden anger at Tavis's words. She looked back and forth

between the two men obviously sensing some undercurrent at play but not understanding exactly what it was. Westby, having regained his composure, pushed off his wife's well-meaning aid.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Westby clapping Tavis hard on the back. "You're such a kidder, my lord." Westby smiled reassuringly at his wife while keeping his hand clamped tightly on Tavis's shoulder in silent warning not to proceed any further.

"What Lord Stanton surely meant was that he was reluctant to meet our Amelia until I had tempted him with her many accomplishments and charms." Westby added smoothly as he squeezed Tavis's shoulder and turned his hard, icy eyes to towards him. "Isn't that right, Lord Stanton?"

Tavis did not appreciate being manhandled, especially by a middle aged traitor who bartered his daughter for the reluctant complicity of peers of the realm in his back alley dealings. Which is why when he turned to reply to Lord Westby, the light of battle entered his eyes as he bared his teeth in a gross imitation of a smile. Then removing Westby's hand from his shoulder, he applied more pressure than was necessary to the older man's hand. Tavis received not a small amount of satisfaction from the grimace of pain that flashed across Westby's face.

"Precisely, my Lord," Tavis replied coolly.

Walking over to where Lady Westby was busily watching the interplay between her husband and Lord Tavis with confusion on her pretty face, Tavis gallantly offered his arm to the lady and flashed a brilliant smile that dazzled Lady Westby, if the small gasp she emitted were any indication of his effect on her. "Will I have the pleasure of meeting Lady Amelia soon, my lady?"

She fluttered her free hand by her temple nervously patting the hair that lay there. “Oh, she should be here any moment, my lord,” she tittered her bright eyes scanning the room for signs of her daughter. “She was most anxious to meet you.” Tavis couldn’t ignore the tight, pinched lines that bracketed her eyes and mouth. *Maybe not so anxious after all,* he remembered with a snort of derision.

Lady Westby gave him a sharp look, and Tavis was obliged to quickly cover his ill timed exclamation with a cough. He vividly recalled Amelia’s reaction at the prospect of meeting Lord Stanton from Scotland. It was right after he had blurted out, “You’re the prettiest lass this side of Scotland.” Then, if that weren’t bad enough, he had started describing her many attributes like some love-sick fool.

Her eyes had gone even wider, if that were possible, and she smiled a secret kind of smile, the kind of smile that Eve surely used to seduce Adam so long ago. He had been entranced. Then, she seemed to pale, and her wide eyes no longer looked soft and dreamy. Instead, they held a touch of panic as she strangled out, “S-Scotland?” Amelia strangled out. “What time is it?”

She had jumped up and was looking out the stable windows. Then she whipped her head around and pinned him with a desperate stare. She asked

him again, “Do you have the time?”

He had taken in a deep breath and let it out before digging into his coat pocket for his pocket watch. “It’s a quarter of twelve,” he replied testily, shoving his watch back where it came from.

She sagged visibly. “I have time.” She gave him a weak smile. “I thought it was much later, and I have somewhere to be.”

Instantly, he had become suspicious. Earlier he had joked with her about her reasons for sneaking down to the stables. He had implied that she had come to the stables to have a rendezvous with someone, and she had blown up at him green eyes flashing at him in rage. But now, now that she had admitted to needing to be somewhere, he had become irrationally and unreasonably jealous.

Getting up from his seat on the bench, he had walked to where she was standing by the window. He towered over her using his height to purposefully intimidate her. “Somewhere to be or someone to see?” he rumbled.

If she had been sneaking out to meet another man when she had run into him, by god, she wouldn’t be leaving him and taking her sweet smiles to someone else. He may not know if he was ready to marry the chit, as Wickes so bluntly put it, but he didn’t want anyone else to dally with her in the meantime.

“Er, both, I guess,” she had admitted frankly. In order to look him in the eyes, her head was tilted so far back that it rested on the window pane. “Will you stop crowding me?” She swatted him on the chest. “I can barely see you when you stand so close.” He backed up and she scooted around him to resume her position on the bench.

So glad to know that my size intimidates her, he thought sarcastically. He ambled over to where she was sitting and propped his foot next to her. Giving her his best ‘continue’ face, he stared at her until she took the hint.

“I answered your question,” she responded petulantly. Still, he kept his silence.

“Fine!” she huffed. “My mother insists that I meet a gentleman from Scotland because she thinks we would make a good match. I’m supposed to meet him at twelve. That’s why I needed to know the time. She’ll kill me if I don't show up again”

Tavis was oddly relieved. “Do you do that often, avoid meeting gentleman that your mother would like you to meet?”

She laughed. “All the time. The last gentleman she introduced me to was seventy if he was a day and stank like a distillery.”

“Does your mystery man have a name?” he had asked nonchalantly, knowing very well that she was supposed to be meeting him at midnight.

"Lord Stanton from Scotland. He's new to town and mother thought it would be my best chance." Amelia turned her head away from him and began to fiddle with the lace on her sleeves.

"And you?" he had asked surprisingly anxious to hear her answer. "Do you want to meet him?"

"No," she had whispered sadly. "I don't want to meet someone who has been forced to do so."

Oddly uncomfortable at her frank words, Tavis realized that he was guilty of just that. Without Westby's blackmail, he would never have willing agreed to meet with her, not knowing what he did of the family and the rumor of the strange curse. Which is why he felt compelled to assure her, "Maybe he won't be so bad. Maybe he'll be charmed by you and sweep you off you feet."

She had sighed then, a sad lonely sound that tore at his heart. "He won't. They never do."

Tavis still remembered her downcast eyes and the sad tilt to her mouth. He did not want her to be hurt because of him, but he could see no way around it.

"Lord Stanton?" a shrill feminine voice demanded recalling himself to his curious hostess on his arm. "I asked if you would like to go in for dinner."

He smiled charmingly at her. "I would rather take a turn around the room with you, my lady, while we wait for your daughter. You can tell me all about her." He winked causing Lady Westby to titter girlishly and Lord Westby to grit his teeth in annoyance. "If she is as delightful as you, I shall be most pleased." Then arm in arm, Lord Stanton led Lady Westby around the ballroom while Lord Westby silently watched from the side.

"...AND then he asked me to dance in the moonlight." Both women had listened to Amelia in rapt attention as she described her encounter with Tavis McGuire by the stables. Sheltered by the cool, comforting walls of the wine cellar, Amelia had spoken freely describing her feelings that Tavis aroused, his comforting embrace and her attempt to kiss him. Though Clarisse had gasped when she had described her almost-kiss, she had remained silent to the end.

"What happened next?" Clarisse asked breathlessly.

Amelia immediately started to fiddle with the folds in her skirt. She turned her head to the side and avoided looking at either her sister or her friend. She mumbled something under her breath, hoping in vain that they couldn't hear what she said.

"What?!" shrieked Bea. "He asked you to run away with him?"

"Damn, Bea!" Amelia huffed in clear irritation. "I forgot you have ears like a cat."

"He asked you to run away with him?" Clarisse squeaked out obviously too shocked by Amelia's revelation to censure her friend for her bad language. "Did he say why?"

"Since he asked me to be his wife, I assume it was to marry him," Amelia added tartly.

Bea rose from her chair and began to pace in front of Amelia. "You mean to tell me that a man you just met and that you know nothing about asked you to marry him and you left him?"

What was I supposed to do?" Amelia asked in some confusion. "Had I left with him, I would have caused a terrible scandal, not to mention that we had just met, Bea!"

"You should have at least tried to kiss him again," Bea replied instantly. "At least, I would have kissed him in spite of his 'rules.' Silly man." Bea snorted. "As if gentlemen ever concern themselves with the rules when a pretty woman asks for a kiss."

"He didn't seem to be interested," Amelia muttered under her breath, self-consciously tugging at the sleeves of her gown.

"Not interested?" Clarisse squawked. "If what you say is true, the man obviously wanted to kiss you." She nodded sagely, her large sausage curls bouncing up and down.

"I agree," Bea chimed in, nodding her agreement. "And I definitely would have stayed to see what could have happened."

Clarisse concurred. "Maybe after kissing him you would have had a better idea if you should have run away with him or not."

"You seem to be missing the point, ladies. I don't know who he is. He never told me what he was doing in the stables in the first place." She sniffled and threw up her hands. "For all I know, he could be a groomsman, or a...a wandering minstrel, or," she laughed a trifle hysterically, "a Gypsy."

"Don't even joke about that, Amelia!" Bea reprimanded severely.

Amelia cringed and hung her head. The bundle of red curls that Bea had haphazardly pinned atop her head straggled down to cover Amelia's face. "I'm sorry, Bea."

There was a tense silence for a moment, in which time Clarisse tactfully cleared her throat and interceded ticking off the items that the ladies knew for sure about the mysterious Mr.McGuire. "I think we can agree that Mr. McGuire was raised a gentleman based on Amelia's descriptions of his dress, his manner of speaking and his general gentlemanly behaviors." She looked appraisingly at both sisters her head volleying back and forth between the two silent women. "Agreed?"

"Agreed," they both mumbled.

"Now, concerning some of Mr. McGuire's phrasings and references throughout your conversation, it would seem that he is not a native of England. Perhaps Scotland?"

"I would concur," Amelia said thoughtfully. Then with a blush she added, "He also occasionally sounded as if he had a slight burr." Amelia vividly remembered those times she had heard his burr come out, that rumbly sound deep in his chest that had made her feel all hot and achy.

Bea regarded her curiously. "When did that occur?"

"When he held me in his arms in the stables and while we were dancing under the stars." A knowing look entered Bea's eyes. She glanced briefly at Clarisse, and the two women shared another undecipherable glance.

"Did nothing else unusual happen when the two of you were together?" Bea persisted.

Amelia could tell she had an idea regarding Mr. McGuire, possibly his identity, but she would want all the information before hazarding a guess.

"No," Amelia began, thinking about her interactions with Tavis. "Well," she amended, "he did seem overly concerned with the time."

"What do you mean?"

"After we finished dancing, he said it was midnight and time for me to go inside." Amelia worried her lower lip. "He also said that someone was probably looking for me, almost like he knew I had an appointment to keep at midnight."

Jumping up, Amelia swore, "Blast and damn!" Both Bea and Clarisse snapped their heads up from where they had been conversing quietly about what Amelia had revealed. "I'm supposed to be meeting Lord Stanton right now. Mother is going to have my head!"

Amelia moved quickly to the wine cellar door, but before she could open it Bea stopped her and pulled her back to where Clarisse still stood.

"Clarisse and I think you should do it," Bea announced.

Amelia looked in confusion at her sister and her best friend. "Do what?"

"Run away with Mr. McGuire," they said in unison.

Of all the advice she had expected to receive, running away with a near perfect stranger she literally ran into by the stables was not one of them. She staggered over to the chair she had recently vacated and sank into it. "What?" she asked faintly. "The scandal…"

Clarisse moved to sit next to her and gave her a reassuring smile. She seemed to hesitate for a moment about what to say, but after briefly looking at Bea for reassurance, she eventually said, "We think that based on what you

said, Mr. McGuire is a gentleman and that what he proposed was an earnest offer of marriage."

"You don't think that anyone else will ever offer for me, do you?" Amelia asked woodenly staring dully at her lap. "You think my best chance for marriage is with a complete stranger."

"No, Mimi," Clarisse rushed to reassure her. "You obviously are attracted to Mr. McGuire and from what you said of him, he is of you," Clarisse began again, "and many marriages have started with less."

Amelia snorted. "That's what Tavis said, too."

Bea moved to Amelia's other side and took both of her hands. "Mimi," she said in all seriousness, "I want you to listen to me." Amelia studied her sister's face and couldn't recall the last time she had seen her sister so somber.

"This isn't going to be good, is it?" She started to worry at what her sister could possibly say to her. Clarisse squeezed her shoulder and nodded encouragingly at both Amelia and Bea.

"Just promise me you'll keep an open mind." Bea took a deep breath and said, "Amelia, since you came out two years ago, I've watched you live your life as a spectator on the sidelines, looking out from the shadows at what could be. It's almost as if you are too afraid to come out into the light because you're afraid you'll get burned."

Amelia started. Bea had used the same words that she had used when describing her feelings towards Tavis. She had likened his charisma to the sun, bright and warm and a little bit frightening. She didn't know if she could get close to his light without getting burned, without losing herself in his brightness.

Bea gently squeezed Amelia's hands. "You gave up on life when it didn't give you what you expected, and you've withdrawn into yourself disguising your sweetness and goodness with a shield of bitterness and cruelty."

Amelia's eyes filled with tears at her sister's words. Everything she said was true. Amelia had spent the years since her debut waiting and watching from the sidelines. She hadn't taken charge of her life because after the first rejections she received from the ton, the thought of opening herself up to further hurt was too much to bear. So, she had hidden herself behind a mask of cool indifference using her curse as an excuse to push people away.

She cringed remembering the harsh words that she had said just this evening about Lady Stone in her silly honesty game. Amelia had come out with her two years ago, and even though Lady Stone was always very gracious and kind to Amelia, she had always treated her with contempt. It was easier to mock those who had the potential to hurt her before ever giving them a chance to really know her. *Or me to know them,* Amelia thought regretfully. How many friendships had she not made because of her fears? What opportunities had she missed?

“I know the curse has held you back; it has for all three of us, but I learned a long time ago that the curse only has power over you for as long as you allow it, Mimi.” Amelia watched tears run down her sister’s face and felt wetness dampen her own cheeks. Grabbing hold of Amelia’s shoulders, Bea enveloped her sister in a tight hug. “It’s time to live your life,” Bea whispered into Amelia’s ears.

For endless moments, Amelia took comfort in her sister’s embrace. She gave her sister one final squeeze, wiped her eyes and announced. “I’ll do it. I’ll run away with Tavis.”

Bea smiled serenely and behind her, Clarisse squealed in excitement. Amelia gulped and just prayed that she was making the right choice.

Chapter 8

IT had been a frustrating hour in which Tavis had paid court to Lady Westby waiting for the reluctant Amelia to appear. She never did show, much to the aggravation and annoyance of his host and hostess, and Tavis wondered at his role in her disappearance. Had she been scared off by their encounter in the stables? Had she been planning on meeting someone else all along and had gone off with this other man instead? Tavis felt his own temper rising at that thought, but even in his extreme irritation, he recognized that it was nothing to the anger Westby had displayed when Amelia failed to show. Tavis just prayed that Amelia was safely hidden away, at least until her father's anger subsided.

With heartfelt regrets and a promise to return on the morrow, Tavis made a hasty departure from the house. He was rounding a corner to take the path back down to the stables when he heard a commotion, almost as if someone were rattling branches against the side of the house. His ears instantly perked and he scanned the area for any disturbances. Aside from a cool breeze gently rustling the trees and bushes around the house, there was nothing out of the ordinary to indicate any foul play, yet the noise continued.

"Damn," he heard a soft whisper coming from...above? Tavis whipped his head back and his jaw hung open in astonishment. For coming down the trellis was a nicely rounded arse that from this angle he could only surmise belonged to a woman. He watched her make her way precariously down the trellis, using the open latticework like the rungs of a ladder. She had made it about three quarters of the way down when he saw her foot falter on one of the rungs. The woman grasped at the twining vines growing up the side of the house in a desperate attempt to regain her balance and stop her fall. Unfortunately, her hands slipped off of the vines, and she pitched backwards.

Tavis had only a second to reach out his arms to break her fall before she crashed on top of him. They both landed with a thud on the hard earth. That is to say Tavis landed on the hard earth, and the woman landed on his chest, the rounded flesh of her skirt-clad buttocks partially on his face.

"Are you ok?" a woman's voice whispered loudly, but oddly enough, not the voice of the woman who was sitting on him.

"Yes," the mystery woman atop him whispered back wiggling her buttocks over his face. "Something soft broke my fall."

"Oh, good," the other woman replied. Then Tavis heard a large thunk and felt a slight vibration in the ground next to him like something had been thrown out of the window.

"Good luck, darling!" He heard a far off click and assumed that the other woman had leaned back in and closed the window behind her because now it was silent. Except for the pounding in his head from where it hit the ground.

He felt the woman moving around again, attempting to stand. She had placed her hands and braced them on his chest which she then gave an exploratory squeeze. And then she paused.

"Uh-oh," she gulped. Her hands began to move tentatively down his chest, over his stomach and into dangerous areas below his waist.

"Good lord," she whispered now frantically stroking the flesh down onto his thighs, "I think I've killed someone!" He felt her scramble off of his body, and for the first time since she had landed on him, he took in a deep breath.

Tavis propped himself up on his elbows and tried to get a look at his assailant, but there was no light on this side of the house and the moon was hiding behind a grove of trees. He could sense her near his left side and imagined that she was working up the nerve to see if she had actually killed him or not, and *maybe wondering, too*, he thought grimly, *how to finish the job.* Moving with a swiftness that belied the pain he was in, he grabbed the woman by her arms and rolled her under him.

He tried to ascertain her features, but she must have had a cloak or other dark garment over her head concealing her face. "Who are you and what do you mean by nearly killing me?" Tavis growled to the struggling woman in his grasp.

Instantly, he felt her still. "T-Tavis?" a familiar voice whispered to him. "Is that you?"

He immediately released her arms and jumped up away from her. She stood, too, and he watched in growing alarm as she pushed aside the hood that was concealing her face. Now that she was uncovered, Tavis could clearly see the familiar red curls and pale features of the woman he had been vainly trying to put out of his mind.

"Amelia?" he asked incredulously, walking slowly over to her. His hand seemed to take on a mind of its own, and he watched his fingers delicately trace the smooth lines of her cheek. He felt her turn her head to nuzzle into his hand, and when she placed a soft kiss there he felt an odd ache near the vicinity of his heart.

It was Amelia. The mystery woman who had nearly killed him when she landed on him was his Amelia. Tavis chuckled to himself. *Twice in one night the damn chit has nearly killed me.*

"It's lucky I was there to break your fall, my lady," he said ironically. "I would hate to think what would have happened if I hadn't been here." It was only then that he took in her appearance. Unlike earlier this evening when she had been bedecked in soft blue silk, she wore a dark, sturdy dress covered by a heavy traveling cloak. Tall leather boots completed her ensemble. And next to her on the ground was a medium sized carpet bag. *That must be what I heard hit the ground,* he thought vaguely, an uneasy suspicious taking root in his mind.

She nodded and smiled shyly up at him. "I am glad it was you who found me, Tavis. Otherwise it might have been...awkward explaining what I am doing here."

"What are you doing here, my lady?" he asked carefully, though he

had a good idea he knew exactly what she was up to. Sneaking down the trellis in sturdy traveling clothes with a packed bag usually meant one thing, but he needed to hear her say it regardless.

"I've come to run away with you, Mr. McGuire." Her voice was soft, but clear. There was no hesitation or embarrassment in her voice and despite the darkness they were in, he could see that the whites of her eyes were trained unwaveringly on his face.

He blew out a big breath and mentally cursed the Tavis of an hour ago who had blurted out his ill-conceived plan to have Amelia run away with him instead of meet with Lord Stanton. His blood deprived brain most likely compromised his mission and possibly the safety of Lady Amelia.

Tavis thought for a moment. *But since Lord Stanton is actually me, she would still be marrying Lord Stanton if she runs away with Tavis McGuire, which was the original plan all along.*

Brilliant! I didn't compromise the mission after all. He would take Amelia away from Westby, find out what she knew and locate the information he needed to complete his mission. Yes, it would work.

He thought a little bit more about the muddle he had created and decided he might have made things worse after all. *However, if she runs away with Tavis McGuire, eventually she'll find out that he is Lord Stanton, er, I mean me. And then she'll want to know why Tavis lied to her about who he, Lord Stanton, ah, I mean me and he, uh, we were.*

Good Christ, but his head hurt! Absently, he scrubbed his fingers through his hair. He felt a soft touch on his wrist and looked down in amazement at the slender fingers that rested there, momentarily having forgotten Amelia's presence before him.

"Tavis?" he heard her tremulously ask, "Do you not want me to come away with you anymore?"

The moon chose this moment to peek out from behind the grove of trees shedding enough light so that Tavis could see the hurt swimming in Amelia's wide, green eyes.

"No, Amelia," he rushed to reassure her wanting to erase the pain he saw there. "I do want you." His throbbing body echoed that sentiment, but his conscience demanded he try one last time to dissuade her from coming with him. Grabbing her cold hands in his, he held on tightly. "But you know nothing of me. I could be anyone!"

She smiled wryly at him, taking note that he used the very words she had used on him when he had proposed the very same thing. "I'll take my chances, Tavis. I know enough to know that I'll be safe with you."

The little chit thought herself safe, did she? Tavis grabbed her around the waist and pulled her against his body. Hard. He leaned his head down so his lips could lightly graze the sensitive flesh of her neck. Nibbling up the graceful column, he whispered seductively in her ear, "You never know. I

could be dangerous." He felt her shiver and hoped that he had succeeded in sufficiently intimidating her to return to her room for the evening.

Amelia's heart stuttered looking at the impossibly handsome man in front of her and hearing him say what she already suspected.

"I am not afraid of you, Tavis McGuire," Amelia whispered as she twined her hands around his neck. "And I already know you're dangerous," she said in a stronger voice boldly meeting his hot, wicked gaze.

Taking his earlobe between her lips, she gently sucked the tender flesh and then grazed her teeth lightly along his neck, imitating what he had just done to her. He groaned and felt his groin push uncomfortably against the tight confines of his breeches. Just as he was debating the merits of pushing her away from him versus rushing her back to the stables to finish what they had started earlier in the evening, her moist, whispered breath fanned his ear.

"In fact, I'm planning on it."

ONCE he was assured of her willingness to elope with him, he wasted no time in rushing her back to the stables. He wanted to begin their journey north before too much time passed and people, most specifically her father, started looking for her.

"Which one is yours?" he had asked after saddling up his own mount, Magnus.

"She's down this way," Amelia had said motioning for Tavis to follow. At her stall, Amelia patted her horse affectionately on the nose. "Legacy's Daughter. Isn't she a beauty?" Amelia asked proudly.

Tavis had to quickly mask his surprise upon seeing her beloved horse, for Legacy's Daughter was truly the spitting image of her mother, Legacy, his own favored horse from when he was a child. Seeing her horse instantly reminded him of the good times he had shared with John learning to ride. It also brought back the old pain of having lost her when he had discovered she had been sold. To see her here most likely meant that the old earl had to have kept her all those years instead of selling her.

"This one is yours?" he asked casually. "You've had her awhile?"

"Yes, she's mine, but my father only gave her to me for my birthday earlier this year."

He must have managed to make an encouraging sound because Amelia obliged giving Tavis the information he needed.

"Father bought her and several other horses from an aging gentleman to the North." She leaned in to scratch her horse's nose. "The gentleman who sold him the horses said he was glad that his stock would be going to someone who loved horses as much as he did."

A ball of anger formed in Tavis's stomach at the blatant prevarication that Westby had told to his daughter about her beloved horse. Ruthlessly, he

tamped down a bitter ball of anger that was rapidly forming in his stomach until it no longer flared with such intensity. Instead, he nodded and gave the horse his attention.

"You are a bonny lass, aren't you?" he crooned gently petting her horse's nose and scratching behind her ears.

He hazarded a glance at Amelia who had taken on the oddest expression on her face. Her eyes were glazed over and he saw a slow flush gradually stain her bosom. When he looked closer, which he did because what red blooded male wouldn't look closer at that magnificent bosom, he noticed pert nipples thrusting against the fabric of her bodice. If he didn't know any better, he would have sworn that she was aroused. Quickly dismissing that idea, he reasoned that most gently bred ladies were almost never randy and ready for a tumble in the hay.

Even so, he decided it would be better if she were occupied doing something else because standing there thinking about the possibility of her being aroused was making it difficult for him to think, what with his necessary blood flow departing for regions below the belt.

He heard himself blurt out, "Can you saddle up yourself for us to ride out or do you need me to do it, my lady?" Just as quickly, he cursed himself for his awkward wording. With any luck, she wouldn't take much note of what he said, or even understand it if she did.

She obviously noted it, though, because she asked with confusion (and dare he hope desire?) in those warm green eyes, "Saddle me up?" A small, red tongue darted out and licked luscious, full lips snagging his interest and leaving his brain completely devoid of blood. "You want to ride me?" she asked with a surprised squeak, swaying slightly on her feet as she did so.

He didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Here was the most passionate woman he had ever met, her innocent siren song causing his blood to thicken and pound through his veins. Though it had been a long time since he had been with a woman, he still knew when a woman was ready for a man's touch, and this woman with her flushed bosom and peaked nipples was practically begging him to take her.

Not for the first time this evening, he cursed his wretched sense of honor. After his years in the army seeing how many men callously used and then discarded women as if they were no more than a piece of rubbish, he vowed that he would never bed a virgin without first being wed. Had he been less of a gentleman and she the servant he had originally mistaken her for when they had fortuitously run into each other, he would have had no problems lifting her skirts and relieving them both of the building tension that had only grown thicker and headier as the evening progressed. However, he was a gentleman and she a lady and likely would not appreciate anticipating her marriage vows no matter how aroused she currently felt.

Exhaling vigorously, he firmly curbed his own passions and reminded himself that if all went well, he would still be able to sample the pleasures of Amelia's flesh. "Your horse, Amelia." Tavis explained stiffly. "Do you want me to saddle your horse, or can you do it?" he repeated clearly enunciating

each word.

Amelia flushed to the tips of her ears and nodded, scurrying off to complete the task he had given her. She obviously was capable of saddling her own horse because by the time he had finished with his and had prepared the others on lead lines, she was saddled and mounted on her horse waiting for Tavis outside the stables. He made his appearance into the clearing riding his magnificent black beast, and behind him he led the other horses that Amelia had mentioned as being recently purchased by her father.

"What…?" Amelia gestured towards the horses behind Tavis. Then she clapped her hands over her mouth and looked at him accusingly. "You are a horse thief!" she yelped removing her hands. "I knew it!" She pointed an accusing finger at him, but Tavis quickly clamped his hand tightly on Amelia's arm to prevent her from attracting further attention

"Do you trust me?" he asked in a low, urgent whisper, which was the last thing that he thought to say. Of course she couldn't trust him; she hardly knew him. To expect her trust after such a short and eventful acquaintance was absolute folly. He knew it, yet, he found himself wanting to believe that she did trust him, did believe in him. So he asked again hoping beyond hope that he was lucky enough to have earned her regard. "Do you trust me, Amelia?"

There were several moments of silence in which Tavis numbered the beats of his heart while waiting for Amelia's response. He had almost decided on a half-cocked plan that involved kidnapping her and working on the trusting bit later, but he needn't have worried. He felt a soft touch on his arm and looked down in amazement at that slender feminine hand wondering what he had ever done to deserve that one small trusting touch.

"Yes, Tavis," she eventually said, nodding her agreement. "With my life."

He kissed her, then, a quick brush of the lips across her mouth in silent thanks her for that precious gift of trust. He vowed then and there that he would live up to that gift no matter what it took. He would do anything to protect her and keep her safe. Even if in protecting her it meant that he had to let her go.

Chapter 9

EVERY muscle in Amelia's body ached, and she groaned loudly as her bottom jostled about in her saddle. Since their late night escape from London, Tavis had ridden her hard insisting that he wanted as much distance as possible between him and her father. Shifting gingerly on her saddle, she winced as her tender muscles protested. "When I envisioned running away with you, Tavis McGuire," she muttered under her breath, "it did not involve spending our days riding as if the hounds of hell were chasing us halfway across England."

For over four days and nights they had ridden north barely stopping to eat and sleep. When they did finally quit for the day, was it ever to enter one of those quaint little villages she had seen that looked like it boasted an inn with hot food and a bed that was softer than a slab of granite?

"I wouldn't know since I've been eating cold biscuits and cheese and sleeping on a bedroll out under the stars." She shot a murderous glance at Tavis who was, as usual, riding several lengths in front of her. "Cold and alone," she gritted out.

"And your conversation, Mr. McGuire," Amelia continued in a high sing-song voice while rapidly batting her eyelashes. "So sparing with your words, so terse in your commands." She waved her hands in front of her face as though she were near to swooning. "Why, I positively went loose in the knees last night when you grunted at me to quit my yapping and go to sleep." That made her smile and she thought wickedly on how that little altercation had ended when she had refused to stop talking.

"What are you grinning at?" Tavis asked startling Amelia out of her thoughts. Somewhere during her musings, he had slowed his mount and now was trotting next to her.

"How's your hand?" she asked smugly unable to resist poking fun at him, especially when all day he had been treating her like she had the plague.

He flexed his right hand experimentally and glowered at Amelia who was desperately trying not to laugh out loud. "It hurts like the devil, you wee hellion."

At Tavis's outraged expression, she gave up and laughed loud and long for the first time in days. "You big bully. Serves you right."

"Weren't you ever taught any manners?" he wondered in exasperation. "Didn't anyone ever tell you it's very unladylike to bite someone?"

"I must have been sick that day when my governess was reviewing that particular lesson." She thought he would ride ahead again leaving her alone to stew by herself, but this time he stayed.

"Besides," she added unable to resist adding her own jab at his expense, "I didn't see evidence of your gentlemanly behavior when you tossed me around like a sack of flour only to clamp your hand over my mouth

so I would 'stop my yapping.'"

There was an awkward silence next to her, and when she peeked over at Tavis, his entire face had gone alarmingly red and she noticed a tiny tic jumping in his jaw.

"I wonder, are you embarrassed because I called attention to your lack of manners towards me during our journey or are you simply resisting the urge to throttle me?" she mused aloud.

When he uttered a short bark of laughter, she startled in surprise and offered him a rueful smile suddenly remembering that she had become accustomed to speaking her unfiltered thoughts aloud. She flushed red herself thanking God that he hadn't been around to hear her earlier musings about him.

"Both," he grudgingly admitted. She watched him pull his collar away from his neck.

"You do that a lot," she observed.

When he looked at her blankly, she continued, "Pull on your collar, I mean." She demonstrated by pulling the neck of her own bodice away from her skin grimacing in as near an imitation as she could to the tight face he made while he did it. "It makes you look nervous and jumpy. Kind of like a frog."

"Damn, Coombes," Tavis muttered starting to pull at his collar only to stop quickly when he realized what he was doing. "It's my solicitor. He always does it when he's nervous." He let out a loud sigh. "It seems that I have adopted his habit for myself."

"Does that mean I make you nervous?"

He avoided looking at her, and she wondered if he would even answer. Then suddenly he noticeably straightened in his saddle and gestured off into the distance where Amelia could just make out the outline of a small hut nestled amidst a grove of trees.

"Up ahead is where we'll rest tonight. It's been abandoned for years, but the last time I was through here it still had all four walls, a solid roof and a working fireplace."

Amelia yawned, the fatigue from their long journey suddenly catching up to her. She looked at the small, slightly run down crofter's hut through hungry eyes.

"An actual house? Does it have a bed, too?" she whipped her head around to look at Tavis in eager anticipation. Tavis coughed loudly and she saw that he was pulling his collar away from his neck again.

"Are you ill, Tavis?" she asked peering at him intently. "You've got that frog look again."

"No, just something stuck in my throat." He thumped his chest dramatically and coughed again. "Likely a wee bug." He gave her a cheeky wink. "Us frogs do eat them, you know." And with a mock salute, he rode ahead with the other horses leaving Amelia to follow behind.

DAMN, she made him nervous. In fact, he had been nervous since they had left her father's grounds. At first he was merely intent on escaping with Amelia. Once on the road, though, he had come to realize that escaping was the easy part of his plan. Spending his days on a horse only gave him plenty of time to stew and torment himself about how he had probably jeopardized his mission and put in peril thousands of good, brave men. He had labeled that particular torment 'Reasons Why I'll Likely Hang.'

Nighttime was a completely different type of agony that he simply called 'Amelia.' During the day, he could almost forget she was with him, but at night under the quiet of the evening sky, it was an impossible task. He couldn't ignore her even if he wanted to so attuned he was to her every movement and nuance of her countenance. Whether it was her quiet conversation around the campfire or watching the way the firelight flickered off of her hair and skin casting her eyes in mysterious shadows, she completely overwhelmed his senses. Even when she slept, she called to him. Her tiny sighs and murmurs as she drifted off to sleep stirred his blood and other dormant emotions he had thought long buried.

There had only been one female he had ever loved and that was his aunt. Somehow, he didn't think that the affection he felt for his aunt had adequately prepared him for these new emotions he was currently struggling with regarding Amelia. While he had always had a healthy sexual appetite and appreciation for the fairer sex, he had never formed an attachment for a gentlewoman much preferring to take care of his bodily lusts with paid courtesans. It was easier and much more impersonal than had he taken up with a mistress or a widow. Which is why he had never had to really worry about how a lady deserved to be treated because it had not come up. After leaving university, he immediately bought a commission and left to fight on the Continent. That left little time for paying court to young misses and learning their unique and mysterious ways.

"And that brings me to the third anguish of this journey which I like to call 'Reasons why I am an ass.'"

He had arrived at the crofter's hut and was methodically rubbing down his mount. "Even knowing next to nothing about woman as I do, Magnus," he said to his horse a note of self-disgust in his voice, "I should never have treated her as I've done."

He thought back to the hectic pace of the last several days and mentally ticked off the ways in which he had wronged her. The insufficient meals, the uncomfortable lodgings, the tireless pace he had kept up. He rubbed his hand where she had bitten him and thought ruefully, *The less than gentlemanly way in which I have handled her.*

Tavis groaned and smacked himself on the forehead. "I've treated her like she was one of my soldiers!" He shook his head in disgust and leaned wearily into his horse's neck. "God, I've been such an ass!" Magnus must

have agreed because he swung his head at Tavis and nipped at his arm.

"You're right, Magnus. I've treated her worse than a common foot soldier." His horse nickered in response, and Tavis finished rubbing him down. After he finished tying his horse to a post under a makeshift lean to around the side of the hut, Tavis moved swiftly back to the front where he finished caring for the remaining horses.

Though he was still confused about his emotions regarding Amelia, he recognized that if he continued treating Amelia in such a fashion, he would quickly lose any regard she might hold for him. Obviously his general demeanor of cool control was not working in his favor. What he needed was a new strategy to endear himself to her.

The wind suddenly shifted and Amelia's voice carried to him on the breeze. When he looked up, he saw that she was still a ways off in the distance, an elegant silhouette sitting proudly erect on her horse. She was clearly talking to herself, Tavis realized, not just because he could see her mouth moving as she muttered to herself, but because the breeze plainly carried her disgruntled comment of, 'idiotic, hare-brained man' to his ears. Tavis grimaced and pulled on his collar like the frog she had accused him of being and hoped that he wasn't already too late to make things right.

"IT'S about time you got here," Tavis greeted Amelia as she finally rode up to the crofter's hut. He had removed his jacket and waistcoat and was working in his shirt sleeves, which were rolled up to reveal nicely tanned and toned muscles.

"Legacy was tired and hungry." Amelia shrugged and then slide off of her mount with the assistance of Tavis's muscular arms about her waist. He stepped back quickly dropping his arms and continued caring for the horses.

"So I let her graze a bit." He grunted, but did not look up when she spoke.

She looked curiously around the hut at her surroundings and breathed in deeply the freshly wooded air from the nearby forest. Though the journey had been rough, Amelia had to admit that she enjoyed watching the ever changing scenery. From the urban streets of London across the rolling plains of England to the rugged peaks of where they now rested, she had been endlessly enchanted by the sprawling vistas and the wild beauty all around her.

"Where are we anyway, Tavis?" she wondered her curiosity aroused by the imposing peaks that towered high above them.

He hesitated a moment but eventually replied, "Just a half day's ride to Gretna Green." He quickly finished with the last of the horses and gathering his pack bags and Amelia's carpet bag, he walked towards the house. His hand on the door latch, he paused and turned. "I thought you'd like a more comfortable night's rest before we make our way there." She nodded, surprised by his thoughtful gesture.

"I'll prepare us our dinner and wait for you within." He flashed her

that lopsided smile of his, the one she had seen a lifetime ago in her father's stable, and walked through the door.

Mulling over the information he had just shared with her, she wondered not for the first time who Tavis McGuire really was. At times like this, he showed the thoughtful courtesy of a gentleman. Other times, though, he showed himself to be aloof and commanding, like last night when he had barked at her to be quiet and go to sleep when she had just wanted to share in his company.

Amelia blew out a frustrated breath. There were also no more 'almost kisses' or longing looks that made her toes curl and her skin steam. In that respect, he remained every bit a gentleman. She believed he was a man of firm morals, too. On more than one occasion she had made it clear that she would gladly accept more intimacies. Despite the ample opportunities she had willingly given him to defile her person, blast the man, he hadn't. He was always unerringly polite if not a touch cool.

Also, Amelia reasoned, common thieves wouldn't have given her a chance to change her mind about running away from him. Tavis did, though. She knew that if she had objected to the horse stealing and had insisted on remaining with her parents, he would not have stopped her though it surely would have meant the gallows for him.

That was the primary reason she had agreed to continue on with him after the shock of thinking that Tavis was a horse thief. Because if Tavis took those horses, Amelia had reasoned, he must have had a good reason to do so.

"That still doesn't mean that he doesn't owe me an explanation, Legacy," Amelia whispered into the soft hair of her horse's neck. Her horse nickered softly and nudged Amelia none to gently with her nose.

"Alright, Legacy! I'll get on with it!" Amelia smiled affectionately at her horse and quickly removed the saddle. Rubbing her down briskly with tufts of soft grass, Amelia loosely tied her horse next to the other ones who were already hobbled and enjoying the plentiful spring shoots found near the hut.

Tavis had been busy inside, Amelia noted when she walked in. Already a small fire was crackling in the fireplace and what looked like a small rabbit was roasting on a spit filling the interior of the hut with it mouth watering aroma. Several small candles were scattered about the room shedding their comforting light into the dreary corners of the interior of the sparse room.

He had done his best to set the table with an oddly shaped cloth that looked to be an old, yet clean undershirt or perhaps a handkerchief. From out of his pack bag, he pulled out a wedge of cheese and a loaf of bread and placed them on the table. Her stomach growled loudly and Amelia realized how long ago breakfast had been.

"Here," he broke off some bread and handed it to her. She gratefully snatched it up and devoured it watching him as he tended the fire and turned the spit with the roasting meat.

"I want to apologize for how hard I've been riding you these last couple of days," he said and then paled once he realized what he had said.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked faintly.

"Oh, Jesus! I mean, how hard we've been riding," he amended.

She watched in amazement as his face immediately flushed a deep red. "Christ, that's not what I meant either," he blurted out. Running his hands through his hair, he let out a deep breath. "I'm just sorry, Amelia."

He looked so miserable that even though she really wanted to see him squirm, she eventually took pity on him. "Thank you," she said graciously accepting his apology. It would serve him right, she thought meanly, if I did make him work a little harder for my forgiveness. But once she saw his shoulders visibly relax, she knew she had done the right thing. In spite of how angry he had made her, it just wasn't in her to be vengeful.

Besides, she reasoned, the way he kept insulting her she would have plenty of practice forgiving him. She hid a smile while biting into her chunk of bread as she thought of all the ways he had misstepped with her over the last several days. It was impossible for her to understand how she had mistaken his earlier behavior with her for the courtly charm of a sophisticated gentleman when he clearly was quite clueless about how to deal with women.

Tavis pulled the meat off the spit and served Amelia and himself. Once he was seated and they were contentedly eating, she decided to find out if what she suspected was true. "Do you come from a large family Tavis? Many brothers and sisters?"

"No, not really. My mother died when I was a month old and my aunt Millie raised me until I was sent to school at eight."

"Eight? Isn't that a bit young to be sent away from home?"

"Is it?" He paused mid-bite to consider her question. "I guess I thought all boys were sent off to school at such an age. Surely there must have been one or two boys at school who were as young as I was."

Amelia didn't like the frown that had appeared to mar his handsome features. Offering him a tentative smile, she rushed to concur. "I'm sure you are right. I only thought, well, if I were to ever have children," she looked down at the table in embarrassment to avoid meeting Tavis's eyes. "That is, if we were ever to have children," she said stressing the *we* in that phrase, "I wouldn't want them to be sent away from home so early."

She waited in awkward silence for him to say something, but all she heard was the quiet crackling of the fire. Eventually, he cleared his throat, and she persuaded herself to peek up at him from underneath her lashes. Seeing that he was at least as disconcerted as she if not more, Amelia gave him a shy smile and asked, "Wouldn't you agree?"

Tavis took a deep swallow of wine before he answered. "Yes, I imagine so. I had never really thought about it before, but I suppose that's

because after my mother's death my father never wanted me around. Obviously your feelings and needs would have to be taken into consideration as well." He smiled stiffly, and she had to stifle an amused giggle when she saw his hand move to tug at his collar.

Ribbit, ribbit! she thought while desperately trying to control the ridiculously inappropriate smile that was threatening to break out on her face.

It instantly faded as Amelia contemplated a young Tavis being sent away to school having no mother and a father, who according to Tavis, detested him. She could picture eight year old Tavis dropped into the middle of an all male boarding school surrounded by older, more mature companions. There would have been no one to listen to his thoughts or to tuck him in at night. No one to kiss away his fears and fix his problems with some milk and a biscuit. No, Tavis had had to grow up quickly without the tender guidance of a loving female.

While he surely he had taken holidays with his aunt, those times apparently were not frequent enough to smooth out his rough edges. At least she was beginning to understand why Tavis, a handsome seemingly confident man in the prime of his life, had been acting as if she were a male companion instead of the lady she was. Before she could stop herself or even think about what she was saying, she blurted out, "So, you really don't know much about women, do you?"

He choked on the bite of meat in his mouth and started coughing. She watched as his face reddened before he hastily downed a sip of wine to clear his throat.

"Of course I know about women!" he insisted hotly his manly pride visibly pricked by her frank assessment of his character.

"There goes my theory then," Amelia mumbled picking at the meat of her rabbit's leg.

"And what theory was that?" he demanded suspiciously.

"That perhaps the reason you have pushed me so hard is that you are more accustomed to the habits of men and not women." She could see him processing her statement in the shrewd way his blue eyes observed her. He had ceased eating and she found herself the recipient of his full attention, so she plunged ahead with the next idea that had been floating around in her head all day. "And that perhaps the reason you have overlooked my blatant attempts to, er, compromise my virtue is that you yourself are equally inexperienced in matters of love and do not know how to," here she made a vague gesture with her hand and finished by saying, "to mmmph." Her eyes flitted nervously between Tavis's face, which had gone an alarming shade of red and her unfinished meal on the table before her. She licked her suddenly dry lips and finished lamely, "If you take my meaning."

"I understand you clearly, madam." He regarded her through narrowed eyes and leaned his elbows on the table so his face loomed closer to her own. "Why I'll have you know that I have had relations, that is to say I have known many a woman…" He trailed off as he realized how indelicate he

was about to be.

Amelia resumed eating her meal. “If I may offer you some advice Tavis? When alone with a lady who is your betrothed, it would serve you well to avoid talking about any and all past relationships in her presence.” She popped a bite of bread into her mouth. “You may take my advice or leave it as you see fit.”

“Fine,” he gritted out shoving his chair back and rising. He prowled the short distance around the table to where she sat and braced his arms on either side of her chair essentially boxing her in. The muscles of his arms bunched and shimmied in front of Amelia’s hungry eyes and she gulped at the raw masculinity of the man before her.

“Perhaps I might offer you some advice as well?” She nodded warily. “When alone with a man who is your betrothed, it would serve you well to avoid questioning his manhood or implying in any way that said man is incapable of pleasing you.” He hauled her up and ensnared her in the iron bands of his arms. She didn’t miss the fierce light that had entered his eyes or the way his hands were restlessly roaming over her back and down to the firm curves of her buttocks.

“You will take my advice, my lady, because I will say it only this one time.” His hands pulled her closer to him, and she gasped at the hardness she felt pressing firmly into her belly. “And trust me when I assure you that you will be pleased,” his voice rumbled causing tingles to race up and down her spine.

Her arms wound themselves around his neck in a tight embrace, and she slowly lifted her eyes capturing his gaze with her own in a hot, bold stare of naked desire. “Then kiss me, Tavis” she pleaded. “Show me.”

Tavis muttered a strangled cursed and lowered his mouth to her eagerly awaiting one.

With as much tension as there was humming between the two of them, she had expected him to claim her lips in a rough, demanding kiss. Instead, his mouth gently brushed her cheeks with feather-like kisses. He then proceeded to kiss every inch of her face, bestowing soft kisses on her closed eyes, her nose, down the sides of her neck, and then finally! she felt his firm lips tease the corners of her mouth before fully possessing them with his on a low growl.

So this is what it’s like to be kissed, Amelia thought hazily. Tavis had ceased being gentle, and now his tongue was impatiently testing the seam of Amelia’s mouth, which opened on a gasp of surprise. He took the opportunity to thrust deeply within the warm caverns of her mouth. Tentatively, Amelia moved her own tongue against Tavis’s and was rewarded by a throaty moan and an increase of pressure from his lips.

Amelia was surrounded by Tavis. His musky scent. They way he tasted, all dark and spicy and hot. The feeling of his muscled framed pressed tightly against her flesh. Amelia was quickly pushed past the limits of her control. She threaded her fingers more tightly in his hair and held him closely

to her while he moved his hands to grasp her hips. This movement allowed her to better feel how the thrusting of his hips mirrored the motion of his tongue in her mouth.

Pulling away with a gasp, she desperately tried to fill her lungs with air. Tavis continued his assault on her senses by pressing warm, moist kisses down her neck and onto the trembling, white flesh above her bodice. She shuddered when he slid his nose delicately along her cleavage, then nearly crumpled into a heap when she felt his hot tongue slide in and out of her generous cleft.

Without warning, he abruptly pushed her away from him causing her to cling perilously to the back of the chair.

"Tavis?" she questioned between deep filling breaths. "Is something wrong?" He looked as dazed as she felt, which, given her limited experience, she thought must be a good sign, yet he had stopped and shoved her aside.

She took a tentative step towards him only to stop when he held up a hand to halt her advance. Confusion and hurt warred within her making her want to scream in frustration. "I promised myself I wasn't going to do that until we were wed," he said in between his labored panting.

"I don't understand," she said shaking her head in confusion. "We're to be married tomorrow. What harm is there in one kiss?" Amelia reached out to touch Tavis. When he shied away, she quickly retracted her hand as if it had been burned.

"We have much to discuss before we wed."

"What…?" she began. But his eyes were shuttered, and she could no longer see the bright flame of passion that had illuminated his eyes just moments ago.

"It's late," he said woodenly. "You should go to bed."

"But…"

"I'll be sleeping out by the horses. Good night, Amelia." Turning rapidly on his heels, he walked out into the night leaving Amelia to wonder what had just happened.

Chapter 10

HE was suffocating. It was as if he had been thrown into a raging fire and had no way to escape. He was desperate to pull in a cleansing breath of air, but every time he inhaled he breathed in more of that burning heat. His entire body was now aflame and heat seared his skin causing sweat to dampen his clothing. *I'm going to die,* he thought hazily, *for this heat will surely kill me.*

But upon looking down at his body, he discovered that the heat wasn't his only worry, for climbing up his limbs and torso were millions of grasping vines curling up his sides and threatening to engulf his head. Immediately he started pushing at the vines in an attempt to break them off of his body, but it seemed that the more he struggled, the tighter the vines held him. He was going to lose feeling in his body before he suffocated to death from the heat, he decided. Already, he couldn't feel sensation in his left arm. Tavis struggled thrashing to and fro trying to free himself from the soft, clingy vines.

"Tavis," a soft whispered voice floated to his ear. "Hmmm." Though he still felt that he was likely going to die from suffocation, or worse, strangulation, the quiet voice whispering his name soothed him. Realizing suddenly that the voice had come from outside his dream and not in it, Tavis awakened with a jolt and cracked a tired eye to peer foggily about.

The fire had long since died, but there was enough light left in the sky coming in through the dingy windows that he was able to quickly take in the rustic hut and his pack splayed out on the old table where he had unpacked it last night. His boots, he saw, were crumpled on the floor where he had kicked them off before lying down. And then he remembered exactly where he was.

The hut. With Amelia. Sometime in the middle of the night after several guilt ridden hours spent in the cold evening air, Tavis had given up his struggle to stay away from Amelia. Yes, he had finally decided, it had been a foolish lapse of judgment to kiss her before telling her the truth about himself. At least, he reasoned, he hadn't actually bedded her like he had nearly done. Once he had come to terms with his actions, he had snuck back into the house and climbed onto the bed behind Amelia, arranging the cloak she had been using as a blanket to cover both of them. She had turned to him in her sleep snuggling her curvy bottom into the crook of his legs. With her warm body tucked against his, he had finally fallen asleep.

Only after remembering all this did he finally hazard a glance at his body. Amelia was wrapped around him much like the clinging vine of his dream. Pressed tightly to his side, her legs intertwined with his and her arms draped possessively across his chest, she had him in a tight embrace. He could see her fiery red hair, lightly gilded by the faint rays of the sun that shone through the window, tumbling loosely about her shoulders. On closer inspection, he noticed that he had fistfuls of her silken strands wrapped tightly around his hands. He must have grabbed onto it during the night, and in his dream, he had wound it around himself tightly like the clinging vine he had imagined it to be.

Gently releasing his hold on her hair, he tried to extricate himself

from Amelia's possessive hold. She sighed, stirring restlessly before finally letting go of Tavis. Turning onto her other side, she curled away from him dragging the cloak with her. Immediately, the sense of relief he felt at her leaving was great, for he now realized that the blazing inferno in his dream was actually Amelia. Cool air blessedly brushed his skin and he sucked in several refreshing breaths of air.

His relief did not last long, though, as pins and needles shot through his arm a sure sign that he was regaining feeling from where Amelia had rested for most of the night. He gritted his teeth manfully while he tried to shake the feeling back into his arm without disturbing Amelia's slumber. With surprising grace for such a big man, he scooted down to the edge of the bed and quickly made his way to the fireplace. In no time, he had built a small but steadily rising fire.

She stirred. "Tavis, what are you doing?" her sleepy voice asked. "Come here and warm me up." She tugged the cloak more firmly around her body. "I'm cold."

He snorted. No woman was further away from being cold as Amelia was. She positively radiated sultry heat and he had been the unwitting recipient of it for the better part of the evening. Besides, if he climbed back into bed with her, there was no guarantee that he could continue to call himself a gentleman.

"The fire will be blazing and it will warm you up soon enough." He made the mistake of looking behind him to where she lounged in the bed.

"Fine," she pouted pushing out her plump lower lip. While he stared entranced at that glistening red mouth, she let go of her hold on the cloak. She pinched that lower lip between her two fingers and then absently readjusted the collar of her bodice that had loosened sometime during the middle of the night, slipping off of her shoulder to reveal creamy expanses of her neck and collarbone.

He turned quickly back to the fire and shoved more tinder onto the burgeoning blaze. There were soft rustling sounds coming from the bed behind him as Amelia resettled herself on the bed followed by a deep sigh and then silence. Hearing nothing more from Amelia, he hurriedly pulled on his boots and stepped out of the hut to tend the horses.

SOMETIME later Amelia reawakened only to find herself in an empty room. Tavis was nowhere to be seen and the fire he had started last night had since died down. Rising swiftly from the bed, she smoothed out her costume and pulled on her boots. With her fingers, she managed to brush through the thick mane of her curls and pull the wayward strands into a simple bun.

She stepped outside into the cool, morning air to look for Tavis. The sun was just rising and Amelia was surprised to realize that despite her troubled mind upon going to bed last evening, she had easily fallen asleep and had slept the night through. At one point, she thought she had dreamed that Tavis was in bed with her, too. It had been lovely to curl up with him in the bed feeling the warmth of his body against hers. When she had awakened,

though, he was gone and Amelia sadly realized that it must have been a dream.

The horses were still tied a little distance away from the hut, including the reassuring sight of Tavis's huge stallion, Magnus. Though she didn't think he would leave her, she couldn't be too sure after last night. Even after pondering his reaction to their kiss, she still couldn't fathom why he had reacted the way he did.

"No Tavis," she muttered quickly scanning the area around the hut. The horses nickered in response, and Amelia felt a sudden urge to take a walk. Recalling a small path located near the horses, she set out to see where it led. Hopefully, it would help clear her confused mind.

Amelia allowed the heady scent of the evergreens wafting on the breeze to soothe her frazzled nerves. All too soon, though, the anxieties she had tried to put aside crept to the forefront of her mind.

"Run away with him, Mimi," Amelia sarcastically muttered, imitating her sister's cool, cultured voice. "You need to live life in the light, not in the shadows." She continued walking at a faster pace as her anger and agitation increased.

"Don't worry about the scandal, Mimi. Everyone will think it is terribly romantic." This time, she spoke in the earnest, bubbly qualities of Clarisse even adding her friend's emphatic head bobs and clasped hands for good measure.

She was running down the path now, her boots crunching noisily in the still of the morning. In her careless flight, her foot suddenly caught on a raised tree root causing her to trip and fall gracelessly on the path. Rolling over to glare at the gradually lightening sky she shouted, "I've run away with him, and the dim-witted oaf of a man is nowhere to be found!" The only answer she received was the muted squawking of birds that she had disturbed in her heated exclamation.

Amelia picked herself up and brushed off the dirt and debris from her skirt. Hugging her knees with her arms, she put her head into her lap. "You never said what to do if he didn't want me anymore." She sniffled and prepared to enjoy a healthy, self-indulgent cry when she heard a rustling on the path. Lifting her head in alarm, she asked cautiously, "Who's there?"

"Amelia, is that you?" came a familiar voice.

Hastily, she swiped at her face and stood up. "Yes," she replied loudly, "It's me. Where are you?" he looked ahead of her and then behind.

There was more rustling and crunching sounds and Tavis finally appeared in front of her about three feet from where she stood.

"Are you injured?" he asked with a note of concern in his voice. "I heard some loud yelling, so I rushed up the path worried that you were in danger." He took her arms and began to assess her person for any injuries.

"I-I was walking down the path and I fell," she explained lamely.

He knelt in front of her and continued to check her for injuries, lightly skimming his hands up her legs and then down again to feel her ankles. She wobbled in his grasp.

"You are hurt," he decided coming to stand in front of her once again. Lifting her in his arms, he held her close to his chest and started walking down the path from where he had come.

"There's a small lake ahead with a very pretty view," he explained to her. "You'll rest there for a bit while we talk." She nodded and settled her head on his chest taking comfort in his strong arms and the steady beat of his heart. Too soon, they arrived at their destination. Setting her gently down on the soft earth by the lake, he moved off behind her only to return with his pack bag.

"I thought you'd be hungry, so I rode into the nearest town and bought us some food from the local inn." He shrugged in self-conscious embarrassment. "I had planned on coming to get you soon so we could break our fast by the lake." He cleared his throat then continued gruffly, "I thought you'd like looking at the view."

Her heart melted a little at his thoughtful gesture. She patted the spot next to her. "Thank you, Tavis." She smiled endearingly at him as he ambled over to where she sat. Lowering his tall frame to the ground, he served their meal of cold meat pies, bread, cheese and fruit. "It was a very kind thought."

They ate the meal that Tavis had procured in companionable silence. When the last crumb had been licked away, Tavis leaned comfortably onto his back, cupping his head with his hands clasped behind his neck.

"It was always on mornings like these," he began companionably, "with the sun just peeking over the horizon and the sound of birds stirring in the treetops that I could almost imagine myself at home again." Watching him as closely as she was, she did not miss the wistful expression that had come over his face. "Home again in the comforting green hills of Scotland instead of on a bloody battlefield in France."

"You were in the army?" she asked peering curiously at his recumbent form.

"Oh, aye," he replied grinning cheekily up at her. "And a captain to boot."

"Did you sell your commission or are you just on leave?" she asked trying to sound nonchalant. Because if Tavis had a career as a soldier, she didn't know how she would bear it if she had to let him go.

"I did sell my commission," he admitted, though the way he said it left Amelia to infer that there was a *but* coming.

"But not because I wanted to. About three months ago, I learned that my brother and his wife had died leaving my father's estate without an heir."

Instantly, Amelia felt a rush of compassion for Tavis and the grief he must have experienced upon learning of the death of his family. “Oh, I’m so sorry for your loss, Tavis.” Laying her hand on his taut bicep, she squeezed it sympathetically. “I don’t know what I would do if I lost one of my sisters.”

He cleared his throat. “Thank you, Amelia, for your kindness.” He had looked so sad when he had told her about his deceased brother, and she thought he might say more to her, but the anguish she had seen on his face was quickly replaced by a genial mask of good humor.

“We had been estranged, in fact, for several years,” he continued casually, “and John, my brother, had been looking for me for some time. When my brother’s solicitor finally found me and informed me of his death, I sold my commission and went home to resume my responsibilities.”

Amelia pondered this new information. She had been right in her first assessment of him. He had been a second son. And as most second sons, he had bought a commission in the military. But because of several unfortunate incidents he was now...Amelia paused coming back to the question that had plagued her all since leaving with him. *Who was he?*

He was eyeing her warily now, and she wondered uneasily at that expression. “What aren’t you telling me, Tavis? Who are you really?” she whispered.

His eyes bored into her own. Though he appeared anxious, *At my reaction?* she wondered, he replied in a firm, steady voice, “I am Tavis McGuire, my lady, formerly Captain McGuire of Her Majesty’s Royal Army and now the new Fifth Earl of Stanton.”

Her eyes widened in stunned surprised. “You’re Stanton?” she squeaked. “You-You lied to me!”

She jumped up from the ground and stood above him with her hands on her hips. “No, Amelia, I never lied.” He hastily rose and then shrugged helplessly realizing that withholding information is in its own way a form of deceit. “I just didn’t tell you all of my names.”

Amelia paled, and for a moment Tavis worried that her ankle was paining her. Instead, she strode towards him without a sign of a limp and poked him in the chest. Repeatedly. “You knew I was supposed to meet Lord Stanton, and yet you played the fool at my expense and let me ramble on and on about him.” She was absolutely furious with him, trembling in uncontrolled rage. He worried that she might cause herself an injury as worked up as she was.

He held up his hands in self-defense. “I did not know who you were until right before we went out to dance.”

“Don’t lie to me again!” she screamed. “You know who I was and you-you,” she choked up, hot tears streaming down her face, “you decided to play with the freak, see if you actually wanted to waste your precious time m-meeting me.”

She swiped furiously at her face and then turned her back on him. He watched her shoulders shake in silent sobs wanting nothing more than to reach out to her. Fearing her response if he did, he remained where he was helplessly watching. Eventually her shoulders stilled, and Tavis thought she had finally cried herself out. He was just stepping towards Amelia to offer her what comfort he could when she lunged at him and attacked.

Chapter 11

THOUGH it had taken her some time, Amelia had eventually calmed herself down and was currently sitting on a log near the lake. Tavis, or should I say Lord Stanton, Amelia thought derisively, was washing his wounds in the lake. Even from where she sat, she could hear him grumbling under his breath. “Serves you right,” she muttered under her breath.

“What?” he responded testily. He had stopped washing and was now glaring at her, water dripping from his hair and onto the once dry linen of his shirt. She took a strangled breath as the wet shirt clung to his broad chest. *Drat the man! After everything, I still want him,* she thought in disgust.

To cover her growing unease at her unchecked desires, she waved and responded with false gaiety, “I said it serves you right. What a shame it would be if your wounds turned putrid and you were to lose a limb, or better yet, die.”

He doused his head with water one more time and stomped out of the lake. “You little hellcat,” he growled. “If you had listened to me before attacking, I could have told you what happened.”

“Like I would believe anything you would have to tell me now,” she responded primly refusing to meet his gaze.

Suddenly a dark shadow loomed over her. Looking up, she was confronted with the imposing figure of a very wet and very large man. He stared down at her with teeth gritted, panting in barely restrained anger.

“You are dripping water on me,” she said coldly dismissing him with a flick of her wrist. “If you were any sort of a gentleman, you would kindly step back.” She pushed at him but soon realized that her efforts were ineffectual. The man was like a stone wall.

“Oh, no,” he said with grim satisfaction easily capturing her hands in his. “You can’t cast me as the devil one moment and then expect me to behave as the gentleman the next.”

“Fine,” she said on a huff. “I’m leaving.” She made to stand but was shoved down by Tavis’s blunt fingers.

“You’ll stay, and you’ll listen to me, or so help me God, I will turn you over my knee and give you the spanking you so richly deserve.”

She could feel her pulse beating faster in alarm at the thought of Tavis laying hands to her. Or maybe it was beating faster from the thought of him touching her so intimately. Either way, she shivered and wisely decided to stay put.

After several moments in which she remained stubbornly mute, he broke their tense silence by saying, “I didn’t know who you were, Amelia, when you ran into me at the stables as I was not expecting anyone to venture there at that time of night.” Though she remained silent, she reluctantly listened to his explanation.

He blew out a large breath. “It wasn’t until you said you were visiting your father’s stables that I began to ken who you were.” Tavis must have been unable to stay still any longer. She watched as he started to pace in front of her.

“You asked me what I was doing in the stables, Amelia, and by the end of the night, you had figured it out for yourself.” He stopped his pacing in front of her. “I was planning all along to steal those horses you saw me take.”

“But why?” she asked in surprised confusion. “You are the Earl of Stanton and could easily buy anything you wanted.”

This was going to be the tricky part. All the way to and from town this morning he had debated with himself about what he should tell Amelia regarding who he was and what he was doing at that ball. No matter what version of the truth he would tell her, he ran the risk of putting her in danger. He couldn’t very well explain his mission, at least not now with Westby holding all the cards. No, that information would have to remain a secret until he could at least discover Westby’s contacts in England or the Continent.

As for his identity, he had to tell her who he was, yet once she did know she would want to know his connections to the family and why he was present at that ball. He knew enough of her to know that if he claimed to have been at the ball solely to meet her, she wouldn’t believe him. In order to explain his presence there and his theft of the horses, he needed to invent a plausible enough of a story without implicating her father, Lord Westby. Regardless of what happened between them, he needed to make sure that she remained safe and absolutely ignorant of his mission and her father’s role in all of it.

He was going to have to spin his story just right to get her to believe that what he said was true. Otherwise, his mission would be compromised, and Amelia could be put in serious danger. Frankly, he would be glad when all of this was over, and he no longer needed to maintain such secrecy. Lying didn’t sit well with him.

“Well,” he said sheepishly scratching his head, “it all started with a bet.”

At her interested look, he continued his story. “Are you familiar with the betting book at White’s?”

“You mean the one that lists ridiculous wagers placed by silly men so they can prove that they are better than other silly men?” She arched a red brow. “That betting book at White’s?”

“Er, yes. Well, as it turns out, my father and your father had a bet that was placed in the books when they were both at University together. I think that my father must have been two or three years older than yours. One day after classes, they were bragging about who was the better horseman and who would have the better stables when they each took over their respective estates. Each, of course, thought it would be himself, and that’s when the idea for the bet was born.”

"I don't understand," she said shaking her head. "What does a bet at White's have to do with you stealing my father's horses?"

He held up his hand to stop her inquiry. "I'm coming to that, my lady. While our fathers were vehemently arguing for their own talent, all the other lads at the school had gathered round and were keenly interested in determining who really was the better horseman. Several ideas were tossed back and forth, but one young gentleman suggested that a truly good horseman would be able to whisk away several horses from someone's stables without anyone being the wiser. When questioned as to how that proved superiority in horsemanship, the gentleman replied that only a truly superior horseman would be able to persuade a high-strung team of horses to willingly depart from their comfortable lodgings. And so the bet was struck."

"What was the bet?" she asked somewhat impatiently.

"The gentleman who was able to steal the other gentleman's horses from underneath his very nose, would be declared the superior horseman. But since both of our fathers were highly competitive, it didn't stop there. Once the first team of horses was stolen, and I believe it was by your father," he stopped and pretended to think about the accuracy of his statement. "Yes, I think it was your father who stole from my father's stables first. Well, my father had to get even you see. He stole those horses right back and had them in their stalls before the week's end. Soon after that, those horses and others throughout the years were traveling across the countryside on a regular basis."

He hazarded a glance at Amelia to see if she was buying his story, but he could detect no suspicious lurking in her trusting eyes.

"After my father died, the tradition seemed to die with him. Except your father must have decided he would try once more to prove once and for all that he was the better horseman, even though his rival had been dead for years. He succeeded again in taking those horses, and I imagine he thought that my brother would continue the tradition that he had had with my father. Unfortunately, your father didn't know that my brother was on his deathbed and therefore unable to act. At some point, your father must have discovered John's death because on my arrival home a note was waiting for me from your father."

"What did it say?" she asked eagerly. Tavis let out a breath, happy in the knowledge that Amelia believed his story even while every false word burned like acid on his tongue.

"He invited me to your sister's ball where he said he would divulge his little game and I could have my horses back if I were horseman enough to take them. It's where he also invited me to meet you." At least that part was true, though invite might be considered a bit of a stretch considering Westby had to blackmail him to come to the party.

"So when I ran into you in the stables you were…?"

"I couldn't very well let your father get away with taking my horses, now could I?" He smiled, he hoped, mischievously as if to bring her in on his little secret. "I was looking for them when we ran into each other, so I could

make a hasty getaway after the ball was over."

"Did you even want to meet me?" Her eyes had filled with worry and self-doubt, and he knew that he needed to tread carefully here. In no way did he want her to think that she was unwanted.

"At first I was reluctant, I admit, but your father was most persistent. He told me of your many accomplishments and your shining beauty." He nodded in remembrance at Lord Westby's description of her. "Aye, after that I was a little more eager to meet you than I had been."

Tavis smiled at the relief he saw on her face from his words. "You knew how I felt about meeting Lord Stanton, er, you." She flushed when she met his gaze.

"I did, except you failed to meet me, my lady," Tavis reminded her. "I spent an hour in your mother's company, delightful though it may have been, but it did not allow us to formally meet in the eyes of your parents."

"I am sorry, Tavis, but you had just asked me to run away with you. I needed to think." A thought must have struck her because she turned to him and asked curiously, "Why did you do that if you knew we were to meet so soon?"

"When you told me how you felt about meeting someone who was forced to do so, I decided I couldn't do that to you or to me. I didn't want you to think that your father had made me come. And after what you told me, I knew you had possibly been coerced into meeting me." He ran his fingers through his hair in a motion that was quickly becoming familiar to Amelia.

"But I also knew after our time together in the stables you maybe had feelings for me," he paused and then he found his courage to continue, "like I have for you. That's why I asked you to run away with me as Tavis McGuire and not as Lord Stanton."

"What if I had showed and had met you as Lord Stanton?"

"I don't know," he replied honestly. "Maybe I would have taken you into the gardens and kissed you until you were no longer angry at me for not telling you who I was." Tavis wiggled his eyebrows up and down at Amelia who merely sniffed primly.

"You are all talk, Lord Stanton. Kiss me until I wasn't angry. Humph! You have had plenty of chances to kiss me--at the stables, outside my window, under the stars-- and last night when you finally do, you push me away and sleep with the horses." She glared at him and crossed her arms over her chest. "I am beginning to think that you don't want me anymore."

He shrugged helplessly because he knew she was right. It had killed him every time he had had to refuse her when she had so innocently offered herself to him.

"You can believe me or not, but I knew we had things to discuss and if you didn't like what I had to say, I wanted you to be free to leave. Had I

compromised you and then told you the truth, you might have felt compelled to stay even though you had come to hate me for lying." He gulped and hoped that what he said wouldn't come true after all of this was finally over.

"I couldn't do that to either of us." Tentatively, he reached his hand up to ease her hair behind her ear. He smiled a delightful boyish grin that went a long way to ease the frustrations of the past several days and nights. "As you so perceptively pointed out, I may not know a lot about women, Amelia *mia*, but I do know enough to know that in a marriage, it's the wife who rules the roost, and if she isn't happy, there isn't anyone who's happy."

Taking her hands and gently kissing each one on the palm he asked tenderly, "Not want you, you foolish woman? I burn for you, Amelia. Never doubt that."

An unhappy thought suddenly seized her. "What if that changes after what I have to tell you?" she blurted out.

"About what?"

"I'm cursed," she whispered, once again hanging her head but this time in shame.

Gentle fingers caressed her chin pulling her head up to look into the tender eyes of Tavis. "Aye, lass, I already knew that."

"You did? And that doesn't frighten you?"

"No*, mo chroí*, your wee curse doesna scare a big, bad Scot like me," he said in a thick Scot's burr. "I would like to know how it works, though." He winked at her. "So I can be prepared in any case."

She let out a breath she didn't even know she had been holding. In the rare occasions when she had revealed that she was cursed, people treated her as if she had had the plague. Even though she had asked for her secret to remain just that, it soon spread, and before long everyone in town knew her family's wretched plight. By the end of her first season, more than half of the ton reviled her as the unholy spawn of Satan while the other half merely thought she was a ridiculous liar hoping to draw attention to herself by inventing ludicrous stories about a gypsy curse. It had been several lonely years since her come out.

But Tavis, he not only accepted her, curse and all, he wanted to know more. A warm, happy glow began to chip away at the shield around her heart giving her a feeling she usually only found with her family and Clarisse.

"I'd like you to know, too," she said smiling shyly at him. Tavis had dug out a blanket from his pack and spread it invitingly on the ground. Pulling her down with him, the two leaned up against the log as Amelia told Tavis how she came to be cursed all those years ago.

"So, if someone were to ask you a question, you can't tell a lie?" he asked startling Amelia with his deep voice. He had remained silent through her lengthy story and explanation of how the curse worked that she had

almost forgotten he was there next to her.

Almost, but not quite. His warm body pressed intimately by her side constantly reminded her that he was ever near. “Yes, that’s right,” she confirmed breathlessly.

“What happens if you don’t answer someone honestly?”

“I get very ill to my stomach, and sometimes I even faint.”

“That doesn’t sound like too much fun.”

“It’s not,” she readily agreed. “Over the years, I’ve developed several tricks for delaying the inevitable truth I must tell.”

“Like what?”

“I speak over half a dozen languages. Did you know that?”

“Aye, well, not that it was so many. Your father told me you were an accomplished linguist. How can speaking so many languages help you?” he asked curiously.

“If someone asks me a question and I don’t want to hurt their feelings, I reply in a different language. They usually find it charming and forget all about the fact that I didn’t answer them in a language they could understand.”

“Clever girl,” he praised.

“I can stall, or ask people to repeat, but in the end I have to answer or I’ll be sick.”

A speculative gleam entered Tavis’s eyes. “Then if I were to ask you a personal question, you would have to answer honestly?”

She gulped and nodded, loving the rich way he rolled his r’s in the word perrrrsonal. Tiny tremors of excitement began to form in her spine, and they spread rapidly throughout her body making her light-headed and giddy.

“Did you ever have any serious suitors before me?” Tavis asked languidly.

Amelia started in surprised, and if she were honest with herself, a little disappointment. She had hoped for a much more personal question than one about her past suitors.

“What? Why do you ask?”

“Just curious,” he replied nonchalantly.

She shifted uneasily next to him while she thought for several moments in quiet contemplation. “No, not really,” she mused aloud. “My first year out, I had several suitors, but most did not linger past an initial outing together. Then after that, word went around that I was rude, and soon it was rumored I was cold. Suitors stopped calling after that.” She fidgeted with her

hands and looked so sad sitting there remembering those past rejections that Tavis wished he hadn't brought it up, especially when she laughed a rather derisive, lonely laugh.

"Mother and father never gave up, though, despite lack of interest. Father especially took it as his personal mission to find me a husband even if he had to pay them. I can't tell you how many of his friends I had thrown at me over the years."

"Was it very terrible, lass?" he asked her kindly.

"Not at first, no. Some of the gentlemen were very kind and charming." She turned her head to look at him. "I would be lying if I said I didn't enjoy the attention." Then her eyes shifted nervously downwards to where her fingers lay clenched in her lap. "But then, well, the men after that weren't so kind or charming. Most were older than my father and several…" She trailed off and he could see the slender column of her throat move up and down convulsively as though she were trying to hold back tears.

Tavis reached over to hold her hand. Giving it a squeeze, he prompted, "Several were what, Amelia?"

She flushed and turned her head away refusing to look at Tavis. "Several tried to compromise me," she whispered unevenly. "One would have if my sister hadn't happened to come along and found me. He...Jeremy was, and still is I imagine, a house-guest. My father took his side instead of mine. M-my father told me that if I continued to wear such revealing clothing then I was just asking for male attention."

"Were you hurt very badly?" Tavis asked with remarkable calm despite the uncontrollable anger that licked like hot fire through his veins. Inside his head, he was slowly strangling his soon to be father-in-law for leaving his daughter defenseless and for blaming her for the attack when it was really that bastard's fault. What had she said his name was? Jerermy? For him he would invent new methods of torture. Torture that would keep him alive and conscious for weeks while he exacted his revenge on behalf of his woman. Any other man who had ever hurt her would die, too, he ultimately decided through the fog of anger clouding his brain.

Amelia shrugged casually as if almost being raped was of no consequence. If it weren't for the trembling of her hands, that is, no one would know how much it still affected her. "Some scratches and some bruising but otherwise intact." He watched as a ghost of an impish smile lit her face. "It was after that incident when Bea taught me how to defend myself. She said every woman should know how to take care of herself. Just in case."

"Your sister is very wise," Tavis said solemnly sending a silent prayer of thanks to her sister wherever she was. Right then and there, he made up his mind to thank her the next time they met. Then his thoughts immediately shifted to the luscious woman sitting beside him. And what a woman she was! He had thought perhaps she had had a serious suitor because of how passionately she reacted to him whenever they were near each other. Hearing that she really had never been courted before, and therefore had very limited

experience when it came to men, oddly excited him. He looked forward to teaching her and had a feeling that she would be a willing pupil.

He was so silent for so long that Amelia began to fidget under his intense stare. Whatever he was thinking of was doing some wicked things to his eyes which even now burned like hot, blue coals in his face. She cleared her throat and smoothed her hair off of her face. “Was there something else you wanted to ask me, Tavis? Another personal question?” she asked swallowing hard as her eyes roaming longingly over the taut lines of Tavis’s neck and shoulders and down to the burgeoning hardness that swelled beneath her hot gaze. She gasped and licked her lips.

He spread his legs just a little bit wider, and Amelia’s gasp turned to a low, throaty moan at the delicious ridge of hard male flesh that was being displayed for her eager perusal. His dark chuckle recalled her to herself, and she hastily pulled her wanton gaze up to look into Tavis’s dark, glittering eyes. “I think I’ll save that perrrrsonal question for later tonight. After we’re married.”

Chapter 12

HER husband was late. Amelia checked the clock for the hundredth time since the maid had left, and it still read the same thing it did the last time she looked. Almost five minutes past the hour. Amelia paced nervously in front of the fire in her room, *our room,* she reminded herself, at the inn in which Tavis had reserved lodgings. He said they would spend several days there as a sort of a honeymoon.

After leaving the lake, they had returned to the old, abandoned hut and had packed their belongings. Tavis had been right. It was a short, half-day's ride to Gretna Green from where they had stayed the previous night. They had arrived by one, had eaten a quick lunch, and were married by two. Tavis had given her his ring with the Stanton family crest on it. Though it was too big and Tavis had assured her he would buy her a new one once they were settled, Amelia treasured it because it was a gift from him. She had looped it onto a gold chain and wore it around her neck where it was nestling snugly in the warm valley of her breasts.

The rest of the afternoon they had spent wandering the small town of Gretna talking and getting better acquainted. After they had eaten in a private room off the main dining area of the crowded inn, he had escorted her to their room where a hot bath was waiting and a maid from the inn to attend to her. He had kissed her lingeringly on the hand and had said in his deep, gravelly voice, "One hour, Amelia." This time, Amelia only felt excited anticipation instead of the impending dread she had felt a week ago when her mother had said it at her sister's debut ball.

Amelia stopped pacing and fussed with the bodice of her nightgown. Standing in front of the full-length mirror that graced the room, she smoothed down her hair that the maid had brushed until it shone. Her new nightgown, a shimmery, sheer confection of lace and satin that Amelia had secretly purchased earlier that day in town, was a soft green that brought out the rich tint of her hair and the gold flecks in her green eyes. Her cheeks were flushed, more from the excitement than the heat of the room she imagined.

Everything was ready except for her husband, and Amelia was done waiting. She was contemplating getting dressed to go find him when she heard a knock outside. Hurrying over to the door, she peeked out, and spying Tavis quickly let him in.

The room was dark, lit only by a few candles and a low fire in the fire place, yet when Tavis first spied Amelia standing near the bed with the firelight illuminating her from behind, he could clearly see every shadowed valley and hidden secrets on her gorgeous body.

"What," he cleared his throat and started again, "what are you wearing, Amelia *mia?*"

She ran her hands down the smooth fabric and then up again. "Do you like it?" she asked shyly. "I bought it today in town to surprise you."

It took him a moment to respond, his mouth having gone dry of a sudden and his mind more agreeably occupied in ogling his new wife. "Aye, I

like it." He prowled forward and grabbed her around the waist. "But I wonder if you realized that while you were standing there with the fire behind you I could see all of you. Each. Luscious. Curve." He emphasized his point by greedily running his hands up and down her backside. Finding the firm flesh of her bottom, he squeezed.

"Really?" she asked him breathlessly as she wound her own arms around his neck. "What did I look like?"

He leaned over so his mouth was next to her ear. "Like an angel." He started spreading moist kisses along her neck and over her face. Remembering how lush and full she looked standing there before the fire in that scrap of lace with all of her curves outlined for his ravenous gaze, he amended, "Well, maybe a fallen angel."

"I wonder if you stood in front of the fire would I be able to see everything of you?" Her hands had found their way to his chest where her fingers were smoothing over the hard planes of his chest.

Tavis grunted in amusement. "I'm not going to wear your damn nightdress, Amelia, just so you can find out. I don't care how tempting you look in it and what it is currently doing to my reasoning. There is absolutely no way."

He was rewarded with a sweet giggle. "I wasn't suggesting you wear my gown, Tavis. I was just wondering what you would look like,...you know." She trailed off in embarrassment and peeked up at him shyly.

"You would like to see my without my clothes on?" He couldn't help the pleased grin that broke out on his face at her eager nod. He wasn't vain about his body. It was well muscled and lean and did what he wanted it to do. That's all a man could really expect. That and to still have a full head of hair at forty he supposed.

Other women had said he had a fine form, but hearing that Amelia was eager to discover what he looked like under his clothing made him feel oddly anxious. *Maybe she wouldn't like what she saw,* he mused. Or, maybe she would think he was too muscled and too hard. Some women didn't like all those muscles preferring a softer and leaner male form. He couldn't think why, but apparently that sallow, half-fed weakling look was appealing to some ladies.

When he looked down, it was to see that Amelia had already discarded his tie and her nimble fingers were at work pulling his shirt free from his waist band. Before he even realized what was happening, she had helped him remove his shirt and was raptly gazing at his chest. With her fingers spread apart, she gently caressed the smooth skin of his chest, the delicate padding of her fingers passing lightly over his now hardened nipples. It wasn't until she raked her nails lightly up and down his abdomen that he knew if he didn't take some control of this situation, he would embarrass himself before he even got Amelia out of her nightgown.

He tried to grab her hands, but the slippery temptress was too quick for him. Both hands snaked down across his stomach to the waistband of his

breeches. He looked down in hazy desire at her small hands grasping the fabric at his waist. She hesitated for several seconds and Tavis guessed she was warring with her maidenly modesty.

"Would you like me to finish disrobing, my lady wife?" he asked her tenderly. She swallowed and nodded.

Once he sank onto the bed, he motioned for Amelia to come over and then implored, "Help me with my boots."

Amelia boldly walked between Tavis's outstretched legs. "Show me what to do," she whispered her face a mere breath away from his.

Using his hands, he positioned her so that she faced away from him and was straddling one of his thighs. With only a slight pressure from him on her lower back, she soon bent over his foot, first wriggling one boot of his foot and then the other. He dimly heard his boots hit the floor, too entranced by the sight of Amelia's wiggling arse while she had straddled his thighs. All sorts of lewd ideas had entered his mind seeing her there bent over in front of him, the thin fabric of her nightdress that did nothing to disguise the roundness of her bottom. It was only through sheer force of will and an iron grip on the counterpane that prevented him from grabbing her hips, lifting her nightgown and taking his wife while she straddled his lap. Tavis was strung too tightly, and at the moment he was unsure how gentle he was going to be able to be with his tender, new bride.

Swallowing thickly, Tavis patted the bed in invitation for Amelia to join him. Her cat-like green eyes watched him steadily as he reached down to his breeches and flicked open the buttons there, a task made more difficult by the tight press of his swelling erection against the front flap of his breeches. Finally, his stiff cock pushed proudly free from his breeches.

"What do you think, lass?" he asked roughly as he stood in front of her to shed his breeches to the floor. "Do I please you?"

"Oh, my," she gasped her hand instantly going to cover her mouth. Her eyes had gone as wide as saucers.

"What's wrong?" he looked hastily down his body to make sure that he wasn't covered in dirt or he hadn't grown an extra limb since he had dressed earlier that morning.

You're too big," she whispered gesturing down towards his thrusting manhood.

He smiled indulgently at her realizing she was just nervous about what was to come. "No, don't worry, Amelia sweet. Everything will work out."

No, you're too big," she said emphatically, a mulish line of determination set on her sweet face. "Put it back."

"What? Are you serious?" At her vehement nod, he gritted out, "It won't go back so easily, Amelia."

He tried to be sympathetic, really he did. Once he had seen her reaction, he had even willed his erection to begin to abate. Just a little so she wouldn't be so scared. Amelia wasn't making it easy, though. In her agitation, she had begun to gesture about, and all that gesturing and moving was causing her lovely breasts to jiggle and bounce. No matter what he tried to think of so he would become less aroused, all that came to mind were those big, bouncing breasts right in front of his face.

"What?! You have to! Just pull up your breeches and...shove it back in there." She made a pushing motion with her hands that looked to be rather painful.

"I assure you that even if I wanted to shove it back in there, which I don't, like this I don't think I could. As it is I am so hard with wanting you that I don't think I'll be able to button my breeches for a solid week, if not longer."

She pondered that information and tapped her chin. "Maybe you could fold it? You know, bend it under and then….mmph? In it goes?"

"Madam, in this condition, or any condition mind you, it does not bend." He was starting to get a little irritated. When he had imagined his wedding night, it had not included ways to put his cock back in his breeches. His imaginings had been more along the line of how to put it someplace else much more warm and inviting.

"Here, let me try. I bet I could do it." He didn't like that purposeful look that entered into her eyes.

He hastily backed away from her. "No, keep your…" but before he could stop her, his girth was encircled by slender, warm fingers.

Then from out of her mouth came a very different sort of "oh, my." This one was laced with breathless awe. Obviously no longer intent on hiding it away, she gently stroked the smooth shaft and gave it an experimental squeeze. She watched in fascinated awe at the increased swelling she felt in her grasp.

Tavis hissed out a breath between his gritted teeth. "Amelia," he warned.

She continued petting him. "It's so soft," she crooned, "like silk, yet so hard, too." She rubbed her thumb experimentally under and around the plump head. A small drop of wetness leaked out onto her exploring fingers, and she spread it around his shaft.

"Amelia," he rasped out. "I can't take much more."

"Am I hurting you, Tavis?"she asked in concern, her delightful hands ceasing to caress his hardness.

"No, *mo ghràdh*, not how you think at least." He took her hands in his, lest she take it into her head to start up her torturous caresses again and held them close to his heart. Lowering his mouth to hers, he took her lips in a

soft, lingering kiss. When he felt her breath quickening in excitement, he used his tongue to demand entrance into her mouth. She opened on a gasp and he slanted his mouth over hers and increased the pressure on her lips. Soon, he felt her small, sweet tongue dart bravely into his own mouth. It thrust and circled around his own, coaxing it further into her warm mouth. Once she had it there, she sucked eagerly. When he was the one to pull away to take in a deep breath, she followed and took his bottom lip between her teeth and bit.

Tavis let out a shaky laugh at her unique combination of innocence and seduction. How he wanted her! More than his own desire was this overwhelming urge to please her. He had never wanted to please someone as much as he currently wanted to please Amelia. Not that he was an insensitive lover. He had simply never cared before. Now that he did, it made all the difference.

"I want to show you such pleasure, Amelia. Will you let me?" He brushed a soft kiss over her still glistening lips hoping to slow the intensity of pleasure rushing through his veins.

"Yes," he heard her gasp. Picking her up in his arms, he carried her back to the bed and set her down.

He looked at her with dark, inscrutable eyes. "Do you trust me?" he asked in a voice so roughened by desire he barely even recognized it as his own. At her shaky nod, Tavis gently, but firmly pushed Amelia down onto the bed. When she was finally lying on her back, he took several moments to simply stare at her. "You are a vision," he said reverently. "But I need to see more of you, Amelia."

Slowly he undid the ties at her shoulders and gently eased the lacy bodice down her chest to expose the creamy globes of her breasts. He kneeled over her panting, his arms tightly braced around her body. Tavis knew he must look like some huge, hungry beast, and given the way he was devouring her breasts with his eyes, he fully admitted he was just that. Judging from the hungry look of desire he saw on her face, he thought she might not mind.

He flashed her a grin, a deeply sensual one that held the promise of more to come before he lowered his head to her breasts. She heard a feral growl right before he claimed a tight, aching nipple in his mouth.

"Ahh!" Amelia's back bowed at the intense sensations that Tavis elicited with his deep sucking at her breast. She squirmed restlessly on the bed and moaned, "Tavis…"

He continued suckling, first one breast and then another. Running his tongue around the aching buds of her puckered nipples, he licked and laved her breasts until Amelia was writhing helplessly underneath him. Moving so he lay next to her on the bed, he propped himself up on one arm while the other arm moved down to her legs. Amelia felt his warm hand on her calf underneath her silky nightgown. She felt his hands slowly creep their way up her calves to her inner thighs where he gently caressed the skin he found there. Each caress took his hand higher and higher up her thigh until his knuckles gently brushed the soft hair and flesh between her legs. Amelia bucked and keened in a high voice, "Tavis!"

"Shh," he whispered removing his head from her breast so he could look her in the eyes. "It'll be alright. I promise." All the while, he continued to stroke her softly between the legs. He gently caressed that spot of flesh at the apex of her thighs driving Amelia higher and tighter with need.

"I..I feel like I'm going to explode!" Amelia groaned restlessly, her head thrashing back and forth in pleasure.

Me too, Tavis echoed desperately in his head. He had meant to go slowly with her, but he was strung too tightly. After a week of tension and humming desire culminating in Amelia's earlier exploration of his hard and wanting body, he was acting as randy as a green lad of sixteen. Tonight was to be a night of slow seduction in which he showed Amelia hours of ecstasy. Instead, he had nearly come in her hands when she was innocently inspecting him, and then after he had ravaged her mouth, he had plopped her onto the bed and started pawing at her breasts.

Oh, God, and what breasts! He had been right in his initial assessment of Amelia's breasts. They were truly the most perfect wonders he had ever seen. Full, round, and tipped with rosy pink nipples, Tavis had been unable to stop himself from exploring her further with his mouth.

And while his lips had been agreeable occupied with licking every available inch of Amelia's bountiful breasts, his hand had developed a mind of its own. Seemingly on its own accord, it had reached under Amelia's nightgown, which was now crumpled around her waist, and had found the silken expanse of her thighs leading up to the moist haven of curls he was now focused on.

He couldn't wait any longer to possess her. Quickly divesting her of her remaining clothing, he braced himself over Amelia's writhing body and nudged her wet entrance with the tip of his pulsing cock, taking the time to rub his blunt head over the sensitive flesh sheltered there. She clawed at his back and moved lower to grab his taut buttocks, pulling him into her and trapping his hard length against her soft mound.

She moaned his name and gently began pumping her hips. His tightly controlled restraint broke, and with a strangled shout, he slammed his full length into her slippery depths. Though it went against his very instinct to do so, he stilled and allowed her to adjust to the feeling of his full, throbbing flesh embedded deeply into her body.

"How do you feel, lass?" Tavis asked tightly, his entire body vibrating with the effort to remain still.

"I feel so full, Tavis," she breathed out on a whisper. "I need," her voice broke as she writhed against him, "I need more."

That was all the permission he needed. He reared back until he was almost completely unsheathed before pulsing his hips forward and slamming back into her. Continuing to pump in and out of her clasping flesh, he pummeled her tight, wet haven until he felt her inner walls rippling around him. She was so close.

Sweat glistened on his skin with his intense effort to ensure Amelia's pleasure before his own. "Let it go, Amelia, and let me take you to heaven and back." He resumed his attentions to her breasts, nipping and biting the already sensitive skin. That was all the extra stimulation she needed because immediately she began to shake, her head thrashing wildly from side to side in ultimate ecstasy. Soon, a high moan erupted from Amelia's swollen lips as her body tightened around him in pleasure. Tavis threw his head back, the cords of his neck standing out while he reached his own release, his hot seed spurting in thick streams into the still quivering flesh of Amelia's body.

Lowering his shaking frame onto Amelia's he held her closely and waited for his rapidly beating heart to calm. Dimly realizing he must be crushing her, he rolled to his side taking Amelia with him. She murmured sleepily, a happy contented sound and then nestled her body closer to his. He listened as her breathing evened out and then slowed, and he knew she finally slept. Before long, he too fell into a peaceful sleep.

Chapter 13

STARING out the carriage window at the rapidly changing landscape, Amelia sighed quietly not wishing to disturb Tavis who appeared to be deep in thought. Once they had left Gretna to head north for his home, he had immersed himself in some papers that his solicitor had sent with him two weeks ago. He apologized sheepishly and admitted that he hadn't even given them a thought in all this time, but since they were traveling more comfortably now would she mind terribly if he looked them over? So here she sat in a quiet carriage that was swiftly taking her to a new life with nothing but her thoughts to distract her.

Instead of examining that particular anxiety, she reviewed the events of her honeymoon taking the time to linger over the details that best pleased her. She squirmed in her seat suddenly very achy and aroused from her musings. If she didn't redirect her thoughts soon, it would be a very long and uncomfortable ride until they reached Ballywith. Very deliberately, she shoved those thoughts into an extremely dark corner of her mind. Unfortunately, she happened to glance over at her husband, and noticing his large hands holding those papers from his blasted solicitor, Amelia remembered what else his hands had been holding just a few hours earlier.

Giving up the struggle to not think about her husband, she decided it wouldn't hurt to indulge in fantasizing about her handsome new husband and the pleasurable aspects of their marriage. After all, he was her husband, a point he took pride in mentioning every morning after awakening her with slow, languid kisses. Many times, they wouldn't even arise from bed until late morning.

While mornings were delightfully passed in exploring their mutual passion, their afternoons were filled with wonderfully intimate outings where they had spent much time in deep conversation. At first, the two awkwardly exchanged small parts of their lives until eventually they were revealing parts of themselves that she knew she had never before shared, and she suspected the same was true for Tavis, as well.

For Amelia, it was a time of growth and discovery. With Tavis, she felt freer than she had ever felt before. There was no fear about being herself or worrying about what she said or how people would interpret her blunt honesty. In fact, Tavis enjoyed her frankness and told her on more than one occasion that since it was such a rare a quality it therefore was more valuable to him than beauty or any accomplishments deemed necessary for a young lady. He said that beauty fades and he had people who could do things for him if she were unable. What he needed was someone he could always depend on to tell him the truth. Amelia knew that was the moment she had fallen all the way in love with Tavis. It may have started two weeks ago when fate had brought them together, but it wasn't until he told her he valued her for who she was that she completely lost her heart to him.

While she hadn't told him yet, she thought he might already know how she felt since he claimed that he could read every emotion on her face as she was feeling it. Then he had made her promise him that she would never run away to be a spy because she would surely be discovered within minutes of starting any mission. Amelia recalled thinking what an odd comment that

had been, but since she couldn't determine what about it was so odd, she had put it out of her mind, once again anxious about what her life would be like in her new home.

She vainly tried to remember what she knew about Ballywith and realized that the one time she had asked Tavis about it, he had gotten distracted when she discovered how much he enjoyed getting his back rubbed. They had been lying in bed together quietly talking when he complained of a sore lower back. "An old military injury from a bayonet to his side," he had gruffly informed her. Amelia had been immediately concerned and had demanded that he show her. After fussing over his old scar for a bit, which she thought had secretly pleased him even if he had shooed her hands away and told her it was nothing to get all worried about, she had straddled his hips and had started to rub down his back, making sure to pay extra attention to his old injury. That's when she had asked him about his home. But by that time, her deep rubs had turned to tantalizingly light caresses, and she was smoothly stroking his buttocks. At one point during his explanation, she had leaned over and licked him from the base of his spine all the way up to his neck. When her tongue circled the shell of his ear, there wasn't any more talk about his home. In fact, there wasn't any more talking for several hours.

Damn! she thought in vexation. Her attempt to redirect her thoughts from her husband had only led to more lustful thoughts. She sighed again, but this time in complete irritation at her wayward thoughts.

"If you sigh like that again, wife, you'll likely blow all my papers out the window." Startled, Amelia looked up to find that her husband was regarding her wryly over the papers he held in his hand. "Care to tell me what's on your mind?"

"I was actually wondering what Ballywith was like. If you recall, the last time we tried to discuss your home, other things came up." Amelia couldn't resist aiming a pointed stare at his groin.

"Ah, yes. You distracted me quite shamelessly from my husbandly duty to inform you of what awaits at Ballywith." Tavis set aside his papers in his valise, which he stowed on the seat next to her. Patting the now empty seat next to him, he said, "Let me remedy that wife."

Amelia enthusiastically moved to sit by her husband having mourned the loss of her husband's touch since they set out that morning, and he became immersed in his papers. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her closely into his side where she promptly snuggled her head into the crook of his arm.

"What do you wish to know?" he asked as he placed his chin comfortably atop her head.

"Tell me how big it is and what it looks like and how many servants you have," she rattled off quickly.

"Ballywith…" Tavis began.

"Oh, and the history of it too and how many tenants you have and…"

she added interrupting him.

"Peace, woman! I will stop your words with a kiss!"

Amelia instantly turned her head and pursed her lips in expectation, but when no kiss was forthcoming, she cracked an eye and saw that Tavis was regarding her with barely concealed amusement. "What? No kiss?" she asked through her puckered lips.

"You'll not distract me again woman, with your witchy ways!" At her disgruntled pout, he laughed and said, "I'll make it up to you tonight when we finally arrive home."

"Promises, promises," she sniffed resettling her head on his arm.

"As I was saying, Ballywith is really an old castle, quite small actually, built in the valley of Ballywith Mountain, so named by my illustrious forefathers. I imagine since Ballywith was built in front of the crag, they decided to name it the same. Not very imaginative my forefathers," he mused aloud.

"And the castle itself? How many rooms are there?"

"Er, several hundred I believe, but I could be off by a dozen or so."

"Several hundred?" Amelia squeaked turning again to stare in amazement at her husband. "That's what you call small?"

"By most people's standards it would be considered small, petite even."

"Your definition and small and mine are obviously completely different. Why, a castle of one hundred rooms in England would be considered quite large for most ancestral homes."

"Aye, I noticed that what you English consider large," here he placed his hands a small distance from each other. "We Scots would call small. Tiny even." Now he held his thumb and forefinger closely together to indicate a much tinier size.

Amelia stifled a snort at Tavis's estimation of English sizes knowing full well what he actually was comparing. "Yes, well," she began pertly, "things must simply be larger in Scotland." She felt Tavis shifting under her. When she looked, he had widened the spread of his legs and was grinning at her in smug male satisfaction.

Stifling a grin at his arrogance, she smoothed out her features and looked at him in wide-eyed amazement. "Your horses are positively monstrous! I've never seen horses so large before."

"There are certainly large beasties in Scotland," he said with pride. "Our mammoth horses being only one of them."

"Oh, I would agree," she nodded earnestly. "One could even say that

the horses are bred to fit the men, you all being so very large." Very casually she let the back of her hand brush over the largeness she knew lurked behind that flap in his breeches. If he took notice, he didn't let on that he had felt her casual caress.

With her hand resting lightly on his thigh, she pretended to ponder something before saying, "But now I completely understand where that expression came from."

"And what expression would that be?" he asked her curiously.

"Why to be hung like a horse," Amelia said sincerely. She had to hold back her laughter as he blustered about.

"Amelia, that's not exactly…"

But Amelia interrupted him. "I didn't realize what a compliment that really was until now, husband, but knowing how highly such largesse is valued in Scotland, especially that of horseflesh, I am sure that everyone I meet will be pleased to learn that I have acquired such a well hu...hung hu...husband…." her voice warbled as her attempt to hold back her fit of giggles failed. "They will consider me the lu...luckiest of women and will be positively green with envy." She burst out into peals of laughter at Tavis's incredulous look.

All of a sudden, Tavis's blustering stopped, and he grabbed her around the waist. Hauling her up on his lap, he mercilessly attacked her ribs in ticklish retribution for her apt tease about his size. "You little wretch!" he laughed. "I'll teach you to joke about your husband!"

"Wait until I write my sister and let her know that her pre-marital talk was for naught and that I would have been better prepared had I gone to the stables and watched the stallions service the mares."

Tavis grinned wickedly, a wolfish glint having coming into his eyes. "You weren't complaining last night, Amelia *mia*, when I had you on your knees and your plump arse in my hands as I serviced you like the stallion you claim me to be."

She curved her arms around his neck and inhaled deeply loving the musky scent that wafted off of his skin. "Hmmmm, I never said I minded Tavis, and fortunate woman that I am, I'll be the only one who ever knows." Taking his mouth in a deep kiss, she kissed him passionately to reassure him just how much she didn't mind his size.

"Aye well, I suppose I shouldn't have teased you so about your home," he finally said when they had broken apart. "Are you very sad to be leaving England? In all the rush, I never thought to ask you if you minded much," he asked with true concern in his eyes.

"A little. Nervous, too, and when I get nervous my tongue tends to run away with itself. It's an old habit and a bad one that I am trying to change. I am sorry, too Tavis, for my tease." She wound her arms around his neck and asked in a little girl voice, "Forgive me?"

He nodded and she lay her head on his chest nestling there in contentment.

"I'm almost afraid to ask, but wherever did you hear such language? I imagine it's not something that most young ladies would ever be privy to."

She tucked a hand underneath her chin and responded candidly, "I often heard my father's associates use language like that. Often much worse, actually."

"What? Your father allowed them to speak like that in front of you?" Amelia could tell that Tavis was outraged on her behalf and felt a quick tug to her heart at his protectiveness.

"Oh, no, father would have not stood for that."

"Then how did you come to hear it?"

She squirmed a little bit on his lap, an uncomfortable feeling of shame settling over her.

"Do you not want to tell me?" he asked his voice close to her ear. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

"No, it's alright. I was just embarrassed because I probably shouldn't have been listening in the first place. Next to my father's study is a smaller room, not much bigger than a changing room, really. It's comfortably furnished with a small desk, a chair and it's lined with books from floor to ceiling. Aside from the stables, it was my favorite spot at home."

"And you could hear your father speaking to his associates through the walls?" Tavis tried to keep his tone light in spite of his rising excitement. Because if what Amelia was saying was true, she could have already heard something that could be of importance to uncovering who Westby's contacts were.

"Usually, yes. Sometimes they spoke too quietly for me to hear, but other times their voices carried quite clearly through the thin walls to my little nook."

Tavis's mind raced at the possibilities of what she could have heard. He wished he had known about the little room when he had searched the study. It's funny that Meeks hadn't said anything to him about it when they had debriefed at the ball.

"Is your room hidden?" he wondered aloud.

"Not hidden exactly, but yes, I could see how someone might mistake it for just another section of wall. If you don't know where to look for the latch to open it, I imagine someone could easily overlook it. As far as I know, no one except me ever entered it."

That might explain why Meeks had missed it. It sounded like the type of room that only those intimately familiar with the house would be aware of.

“And that’s where you heard them speaking in such vulgar terms.”

She nodded her head on his chest and then laughed. “When I could hear them, they only ever talked about horses. They always talked about this one horse called Big Harry. On more than one occasion I heard them laughing loudly about how the females always liked Big Harry because he was hung like a horse, and I remembered thinking to myself how odd it was for them to laugh about Harry being hung like a horse when he was obviously a horse and how else could he be hung? It didn’t make any sense to me. I asked Bea about it, and she just laughed saying that I would understand once I was married.” Amelia lifted her head off his chest to give him a mischievous look. “And now that I’ve seen you, I completely understand what they were talking about. I blush at how naive I was, for it is clear to me now that they must have been speaking of a man.” Her expression turned to one of absolute befuddlement. “Though why gentlemen would want to discuss another man’s appendages is beyond me.”

He chuckled. “Yes, well, we gentleman are a strange lot, and luckily for mankind, you women are willing to put up with us.”

“Hmpf, you most certainly are!” She gave him a quick peck to the mouth and resettled on his chest. Tavis stretched out his leg on the seat bench to better accommodate holding her. While he gently stroked her hair, he went over the information she had just shared. Could Harry the Horse be Westby’s contact? Is it possible that this man had been to Westby’s house? What about the men that Amelia heard in Westby’s office, his associates. Were they always the same men that she heard and how many were there?

“Amelia,” he said touching her shoulder to rouse her. When she remained still, he tried again. “Amelia, sweet, are you awake?”

Her deep breathing and sleepy murmur were his only response. Tavis blew out a frustrated breath. He needed answers and the sooner the better. He couldn’t keep up this charade with Amelia much longer. She was too perceptive by half and would soon discover what he was hiding before he was ready for her to know, potentially endangering her, a risk he was not willing to take.

Leaning his head against the seat back, Tavis mulled over the letters he had been reading, particularly the one from Wickes that had been waiting for him at the inn in Gretna Green. Before he and Amelia had left London, he had made sure to inform Wickes of his change of plans. Unsurprisingly, Wickes was not pleased his elopement, but he said they would discuss further in two weeks when he would travel to Ballywith. Tavis was not looking forward to that discussion and would rather have it done and over with. He recalled Wickes’s strongly worded censure and thought back to his own experiences with Wickes when he was angered and thought, *then again, maybe not.* Though he hated to do so, this time he could wait.

At times like these, he wondered whether his decision to disobey direct orders was worth the impatience he had felt at making Amelia his bride. Had he waited and followed the plan, he most likely would be engaged to her and would have had a chance to investigate Amelia’s secret room for himself at his leisure, a fact that rankled the more the miles sped past between him and

Amelia's London home. Looking at his wife's peacefully sleeping form, Tavis pushed aside any guilt he may have felt and decided the risk was worth it. This first week of marriage had been the most rewarding of his entire life. Every day he learned something new about his wife, and every day she burrowed more deeply into his heart.

To his great joy, he found that she enjoyed being in the outdoors, something that he had never really thought was important to him until they had discussed it. She told him how much she loved being out in God's natural world taking comfort in the peace and beauty to be found there. Just like him, she was an avid reader and he discovered that they had read many of the same books, the works of Shakespeare being a favorite for both of them. Through their talks regarding some of their favorite books, Tavis was delighted to find that she had a keen and assessing mind and looked forward to testing that mind during the long winter months over many a competitive game of chess.

It was also a time of great peace for him, too. Because of his singular upbringing and his subsequent time in the army, he had always been a bit of a loner and had always felt like he never really fit in. He had no family to speak of, aside from his Aunt Millie who he hadn't seen in years, and he always found it difficult to make friends since he was uneasy about offering his trust to someone who could potentially betray him.

In Amelia, he found a kindred spirit, someone, who because of her unique curse, was also familiar with loneliness and feeling out of step with society. Being in her presence and knowing that she would always be beside him had started to fill that empty, hollow feeling that had constantly plagued him, leaving in its place a feeling of warm contentment and belonging. For the first time in his life, he had someone to call his very own. It was a heady feeling for a solitary man, and one that also brought him fits of anxiety especially when so many things remained unclear.

Tavis stared out the window worrying about what the future would hold when he spied the familiar jagged peaks of Ballywith and the densely wooded forests surrounding the estate. He looked down to Amelia to awaken her and was arrested by the sight of her peacefully slumbering form curled up next to him on the seat. Delicate hands curled under her cheeks, which were flushed and rosy with sleep. Tendrils of her hair had come unbound and lay like silken ropes over the curve of her face and down onto the slopes of her shoulder. Thick black lashes fanned out on her cheekbones, a striking contrast to her pale ivory skin. He marveled yet again that this beautiful passionate woman was his. Forever.

Quite suddenly, a ball of lead seemed to form in Tavis's stomach making his insides churn and feel hollow all at once. Some foreign emotion unlike anything he had ever felt before struggled up from all that riotous churning making Tavis feel queasy, light-headed and elated all at once. It was only through intense concentration that he was he able to push whatever was happening to him away, and soon he had regained some semblance of his equilibrium. Or so he hoped.

With a little trepidation at triggering a repeat of those overwhelming emotions, he gently shook Amelia's shoulders to rouse her. "We're home."

Amelia yawned and stretched widely. When finally awake, she looked eagerly out the window at the beauty of her new home. After several moments of silence in which Amelia gazed rapturously at the rolling hills, towering peaks and wooded forests of Ballywith, which were all softly illuminated for her wondering eyes by the brilliant light of the fading day, did she finally turn to him with shining eyes. “Oh, Tavis! How wonderful to be starting our lives together in such a magical place.”

He had felt fine watching Amelia take pleasure in seeing her new home, had again thanked his lucky stars that he had found such a woman, but as soon as she has flashed those sparkling eyes in his direction and smiled at him in brilliant radiance, that unfamiliar feeling from before rose up threatening to choke the very air from his lungs. His stomach had started clenching convulsively, and he briefly wondered if he had contracted some sort of fatal illness. He sincerely hoped not.

Swallowing through the tightness constricting his throat, he nodded and managed to repeat rather weakly, “How wonderful.” She turned away and continued to gaze out the window, occasionally exclaiming at something she found to be interesting or beautiful.

He thought it was odd how he only felt ill when he looking upon his wife. With her back turned to him, he only felt peaceful and comfortable, like he had since he had known her; however, the moment she looked at him and he could see the vibrancy of her very soul staring back at him with such honest intensity, well, it made him feel like he was drowning with no hope of survival. It is almost as if...he thought trying desperately to pin down that elusive emotion he was currently feeling.

The carriage hit a large bump as it pulled around a curve and the castle was finally visible in all of its glory. Whatever was struggling to surface in his mind was lost, and the moment was gone.

The Earl and Countess of Stanton were finally home.

Chapter 14

WALKING over to the windows of her new master suite, Amelia gazed out onto the grounds hoping that the serene beauty of her new home would help lift her flagging spirits. But as she watched, the deep shadows of night silently crept across the grounds engulfing the flowers and the trees in its inky darkness until it eventually swallowed the last rays of light. More depressed than ever, she turned away from the window to listlessly wander about the room bemoaning Tavis's absence.

Ever since they had arrived at Ballywith over a week ago, Amelia had felt a chilly reserve from Tavis that had not existed before they had arrived home. In fact, they had only just arrived at Ballywith when Tavis had made his apologies to her and had abruptly left to attend to some business while she remained behind to rest and get settled in by herself. She had hoped to spend some time with him, had in fact asked him to stay, but he had merely placed a chaste kiss on the top of her head and had told her his business could not delay.

She had hoped that once he had settled his immediate business on the estate he would be able to spend more time with her, yet each day he seemed to have more and more work to do. Sometimes she would awaken and he would already be gone for the day, and it wouldn't be until the evening meal when she would finally see him for the first time of the day. Tavis was always apologetic, yet he still remained distant. The passionate spontaneity of their honeymoon had completely disappeared. Amelia missed the loss of their intimacy, but she mourned the loss of his company and wondered if her honeymoon was well and truly over now that they had arrived at Ballywith.

Shaking her head to dispel her gloomy mood, she thought perhaps a nap would help clear her head. Remembering that her new dressing room had a cozy fire already built up and a comfortable chaise to relax on, Amelia walked into her dressing room and stopped in surprise.

Upon entering, she immediately took notice of several large changes to the room. Previously, only a few of her meager belongings had been in the room, only those things she was able to carry with her, yet now she saw all of her familiar items lining the lavish vanity. On the walls were other of her possessions, including a beloved painting that her sister Evie had done for her as a present on her last birthday. She saw her own silky dressing gown and matching slippers as well as the rest of her clothing that she had left behind.

"Margaret!" Amelia gasped loudly when the plump, brown-haired figure of her longtime maid suddenly appeared beside her in her dressing room. "Whatever are you doing here? Shouldn't you still be in London?" Amelia sank down into the chair in front of her vanity and regarded her maid with undisguised shock and curiosity.

The little maid smiled at her frazzled mistress and handed her a cup of hot tea that she had brought in with her on a silver tray. "I left London the night you did, my lady, and was sent here to wait for you to come home with the master. Been at my sister's visiting since then and would have been here upon your arrival, but she took ill and there was no one else to nurse her, so I had to stay. I'm so sorry, my lady, that I wasn't here when you arrived."

Amelia gratefully drank the hot tea, its familiar taste easing her sudden surprise and waved off her maid's apology. "But how did you know where to find me? I don't understand how you could be here especially since when I left I didn't even know that this was where I would end up."

"It's an exciting story, my lady, at least exciting for me." She gently turned Amelia around so she faced the mirror of her vanity. Picking up her hairbrush, Margaret began to work through the snarls that Amelia had been unable to untangle herself, having refused to let anyone else in the household attend her hair. Margaret tugged on a particularly stubborn knot and smiled in apology at Amelia's sharp wince of pain. "I'd say it's a good thing that I came when I did, my lady, as it's obvious you're in need of a little caring after."

"Your story, Margaret," Amelia huffed out impatiently. She set the teacup aside on the tray next to her and said, "If you please."

"Right you are, my lady. It was the night of the ball and I was awaiting your return in your chambers. It were only an hour or so past midnight, but seeing as how you don't like them balls I knew that you would be coming in soon to go to bed. Well, imagine my surprise when at half one the door opens and in comes Her Majesty and Clarisse!" She had stopped her brushing to throw her hand dramatically over her chest. Amelia smothered a frustrated sigh and knew that Margaret would get around to telling her the story in her own time. Amelia decided she might as well be comfortable while she waited. Grabbing the hot scone that was also on her tea tray, Amelia greedily devoured it and waited for Margaret to continue.

"I says to them, 'Where is my lady Amelia? Is she ill?' Because truth be told both of them were acting a little queerly, and I thought for sure that you had taken ill or maybe broken your leg, but then she starts giving me orders telling me 'Pack Amelia's trunks and be quick about it.' When I tried to ask where you were going, the Queen just shooed me off and told me to hurry."

"What happened then?" Amelia asked breathlessly, oddly excited to learn what had happened after she had run away with Tavis.

"The three of us packed your trunks. Cleaned out your room we did. Then she says, 'We must hurry. Help me move these across the hall to my room.' So the three of us pushed and shoved those trunks across the hall and hid them in your sister's old room. I thought it was all rather strange, but then something stranger still happened." Margaret put down the brush momentarily and looked at Amelia through the mirror in wide-eyed excitement. "I was peeking out the door and saw your father come running up those stairs like the very devil himself was a-chasing him and Mr. Jeremy hard on his heels. The two men storm into you room and practically rip the door from its hinges. I didn't see anything more but it was a good thing we were all over in her room because from the sounds coming from yours, all holy hell was being unleashed."

Amelia winced knowing that her father was most likely angry with her for having missed her appointment with Lord Stanton. She couldn't even imagine how he had felt when she failed to appear. And Jeremy? It's not like the two of them had any understanding or even affection between the two of

them. She couldn't imagine why he would be so upset by her leaving. *I hope father will be pleased when he finds out everything worked out for the best,* Amelia thought optimistically.

"...and when we went over there after everything had calmed down, it was like a storm had been unleashed in your room," Margaret continued. "Someone had ripped apart your bed and torn apart your dressing table. All of your drawers were opened and some lay broken on the floor. Even your favorite rocking chair lay broken and mangled in a heap in the corner of the room."

"Oh, my!" Amelia pressed her hand over her mouth in patent disbelief. How could he have done something like that? What if she or Margaret had still been in the room? How would they have fared in the face of his anger?

"Oh, too right, my lady. It was then that I knew something was going on, so I turn to the Queen and demand, 'Where is my lady? What has happened to her?' I thought for sure she was going to tell me that you had died or maybe been kidnapped." Margaret paused and contemplated this sad fate with a hint of maudlin glee in her deep brown eyes. Amelia stifled a laugh. She loved her maid dearly, had done so since she ceased being her nurse and had taken the post of maid at the age of fourteen, but oh! She was a blood-thirsty little thing.

Margaret shook her head and smiled at Amelia. "Then an amazing thing happened. Bea smiles, a real smile, not one of those fake society things she plasters on her face most of the time mind you, and she tells me, 'Amelia has eloped with Lord Stanton.'"

"What? Beatrice said those exact words?" Amelia demanded of her maid.

"I remember it clearly because of how happy I was for you, my lady, to have finally found someone you cared for so much that you would run away with him."

How could she have known? Amelia wondered. She hadn't even known until right before their wedding, so what had Bea known that she hadn't?

"And then your sister says to me, 'You must go and wait for her in her new home. It isn't safe for you to be here when father is still so upset.' While I can tell you that I didn't much enjoy the thought of leaving London, I knew it was probably for the best if I left. Just in case." She winked at Amelia and resumed brushing Amelia's hair.

"And so?" Amelia demanded.

"And so what, my lady?" Margaret asked quizzically.

"And so how did you get here, Margaret? That can't be the end of it!"

"Your sister left and hired a carriage to take me and your trunks to

Lord Stanton's house. We sneaked everything out of the house, and I was out of London before the sun rose. I stopped by my sister's like I told you, and here I am."

"Bea left nothing for me? No note or a message from her to me?" Amelia thought for sure that if her sister had already been aware of who she was running away with, she would have at least sent a letter along with her maid.

"So she did, my lady, so she did."

"Margaret!" Amelia practically yelled. "Where is it?"

"Are you wanting to read it now, then, my lady? I thought perhaps you would be wanting to take a nap since I can see as how you got some real dark circles under your eyes like you haven't been sleeping all that well." Margaret winked cheekily at Amelia, who blushed at the insinuation. If only, she thought glumly knowing that the real reason she hadn't been sleeping was due to her husband's sudden distance.

Amelia allowed Margaret to help her out of her dress and into her familiar dressing robe and slippers. Once settled onto the chaise with a warm blanket wrapped about her legs, she closed her eyes, though sleep eluded her. Too much had happened in the last three weeks, and while most of it she thought was wonderful, this last week had been eye-opening for her. Where once she was convinced that she had done the right thing in eloping with Tavis, his cool reticence had her worrying that maybe she had moved too hastily. Because now that they were actually married, he seemed to want nothing to do with her. Silent tears flowed rapidly down her cheeks, and Amelia stifled a sob, hastily wiping at her tears hoping that Margaret wouldn't notice.

Margaret, though, had keen eyes and even keener ears. "What's this, my lady?" She moved swiftly from the vanity to Amelia and offered her a handkerchief.

Knowing that there was no use in hiding anything from Margaret, Amelia took the handkerchief to wipe her face, and then began haltingly, "I...I think I made a mistake in marrying Lord Stanton," Amelia sniffled.

Immediately, Margaret's eyes narrowed to two dark little slits of vexation. "Has he hurt you, my lady? Is that it?"

"No, no," she rushed to reassure, "nothing like that. It's just that ever since we've arrived at Ballywith, he's been so very distant and cool." Amelia shook her head mournfully. "I don't know what happened, Margaret," she whispered. "He just doesn't seem to want me anymore. When we arrived, he introduced me to the servants and then he...he left me in the hallway soon after that. He didn't even bother showing me to my rooms." Amelia wiped at her eyes again. "Said he had business to attend to. Every day since then has been the same. I've barely seen him, and I don't know what I did!" Amelia started sobbing in earnest into the comforting arms of Margaret.

Margaret clucked sympathetically and gently patted Amelia on the

back. “Let me tell you something about men-folk, Amelia. They get scared real easy when it comes to women and marriage. Don’t even try to get them to talk about their feelings because more than likely they won’t know the difference between a tender emotion like love or indigestion from eating too quickly!” Margaret chuckled to herself at her own wit and shook her head. “Probably your man just got a little scared about bringing home a new wife, especially when he hasn’t figured out for himself that he cares for you yet.”

“He doesn’t care for me,” Amelia protested. “How can you even think that or even know that? You just arrived!” Nonetheless, she was helpless to stop the nervous sort of hope that fluttered about in her belly at Margaret’s words.

“Because you haven’t talked to the servants and heard what I’ve heard about how his eyes fairly glowed with pride and affection when he introduced you to the staff.” Margaret nodded authoritatively at Amelia. “Everyone saw and was so happy for the master that he had found someone that he obviously cared for. That man has got tender feelings for you, Amelia. He’s just terrified, poor man, because he’s been caught, and he doesn’t know what to do about it.”

“Really?” Amelia asked breathlessly, too afraid to hope, but powerless to stop.

“You mark my words, my lady. That man is smitten. Why, when he left you in the hall, the servants saw him steal a glance at you over his shoulder. They said he looked like a dying man, and you were his only chance at salvation. Looked right sorrowful he did when he finally turned away and marched down that hall, his shoulders all slumped over. Kind of like you did when I found you in here, moping about looking all sad.” Margaret unstopped a bottle of lavender and applied it lightly to the back of Amelia’s neck and behind her ears.

“There now,” she said briskly as she re-stopped the bottle. “That’ll help you relax some so you can get some sleep. Don’t you worry any about that man of yours. He’ll come around. Just give him some time.”

With a final pat on Amelia’s back, Margaret left Amelia, who finally fell into a fitful sleep.

AFTER working with the horses all morning, Tavis returned to his study to purposefully avoid seeing Amelia, something he had been doing since they had arrived home over a week ago. He didn’t know quite what had happened, but somewhere after waking her up in the carriage and arriving home, the enormity of what was happening finally hit him. He had married. A virtual stranger no less, and now he would have to honor, cherish and protect her. Forever. That one word had done something funny to him. Tavis had gone sick in the stomach and his mouth had dried of a sudden leaving him swallowing convulsively. He had had to leave Amelia standing amongst the servants lest he embarrass himself by becoming ill in the front hall.

Leaving her there had been one of the hardest things he had ever had to do, especially when she still looked so heart-stoppingly beautiful, her cheeks all flushed and rosy from her nap and her curls a riotous tumble

cascading down her back. All he really wanted to do was to scoop her up and take her to their bedroom to love her for at least a week with no interruptions. But instead, he had slunk away to see to some business, abandoning his new wife on their first night together in their home. He was being an ass again, and he knew it, had in fact decided on it while shoveling hay into the horses' stalls this morning, which *they* had all agreed upon if their loud whinnying was any indication of their opinions.

Every day after that, Tavis awoke before dawn to sneak out to the stables in hopes of avoiding Amelia. He could go all day without seeing her except for at the evening meal, and by then he was so tired from a full day of training horses and meeting with his solicitor discussing what improvements needed to be done to the estate that he excused himself right after dinner to go to bed.

Tavis rationalized his actions to himself by saying that the closer the two became, the more likely she would find out about her father, something Tavis could not allow to happen. He had made a promise to himself that he would protect her, and if that meant keeping some distance from her so she didn't find out information that could hurt her, than that is what he would do.

Deep down, though, he knew that he was afraid of what he felt when he looked at Amelia. During the past several days he had tried to describe that emotion he experienced when he was with her, but every time he tried to think about what he felt for Amelia, he only came up with I feel...I feel...And then he realized that was it. For the first time, he felt a strong emotion other than hate, an emotion he was all too familiar with because of his bastard father. This other feeling was new and he didn't know quite what to do about it.

Amelia would know, his subconscious whispered insidiously, and he glumly recognized the truth of that thought. Amelia would know what to say to help him through whatever this was. She was so clever and had such a gentle way about her that talking with her always left him feeling so peaceful. He missed that. Missed hearing her voice. Missed having her by his side every day. He missed her.

Before he had even fully decided what he would do, Tavis was out his study and up the stairs to their room where he hoped to find his wife. Entering their bedchamber, he noticed that while she was not about, the door to her dressing room was somewhat ajar. Rapidly, he walked to the door and opened it, only to stop in his tracks at the tranquil vision in front of him. Curled up into a ball on a plush chaise close to a low burning fire lay Amelia fast asleep. His heart did an odd stutter and that hollow feeling began to make him feel queasy again, but he had missed her so much that it was easy to ignore his discomfort if it meant he could be with Amelia.

Instead, he crept closer to her as silently as possible not wishing to disturb her slumber and sinking to his knees next to the chaise, Tavis gently lowered his lips to her slightly parted ones and did what he had been longing to do for over a week. Tavis kissed his wife.

Chapter 15

IT was early morning still and the sun had yet to fully make an appearance above the horizon, yet Tavis was awake and trying to dress without disturbing Amelia. Unlike the last week, this time he wished he could stay and linger in bed with her, which is why he had his back to the bed while he pulled on his shirt and gathered his pants, all the while consciously fighting the urge to glance back at the bed where his wife lay in delightful dishevelment. Firmly pushing aside all thoughts of their passionate night together that resulted from their new understanding of each other, Tavis swallowed hard and shook his head to dispel any tempting thoughts that might remain. Steeling his resolve, he told himself to not look back no matter what, for if he did, it would be hours before he would want to tear himself away from her arms.

Hastily donning his boots lest she awaken, Tavis crept out the room and down the stairs. Quickly passing through the house, Tavis let himself out of the house, walked down past the stables, and on to a small hunting shack that he had stumbled upon in his explorations of the grounds. He entered the shack and allowed his eyes to adjust to the dim interior.

"I didn't think you were coming," a dry voice said from the shadows.

"Jesus, Wickes!" Tavis exclaimed looking at his friend and supervisor who had just emerged from a corner. "I wasn't expecting you for another twenty minutes at least."

"And here I was expecting you twenty minutes ago."

Tavis pulled out his pocket watch and winced when he realized that he was indeed late for his meeting with Wickes. "I was unavoidably detained," he said lamely.

"I'm sure your lovely new wife wouldn't have had anything to do with that, would she?" Wickes queried Tavis in a deceivingly mild voice.

"About that…." Tavis said sheepishly knowing from Wickes's previous letter that he had been less than pleased with Tavis's marriage.,

"Damn it, Tavis!" Wickes exploded as he began to pace the small confines of the shack. "What were you thinking?"

Tavis opened his mouth to reply but was not given a chance to speak. Wickes rounded on him and grabbed him roughly by the front of his shirt. Though Tavis was a tall man, Wickes towered over him by a good head, and he used every bit of that advantage as he expressed his extreme displeasure over Tavis's actions.

"You were supposed to get engaged to the chit and stay in London so you had time to conduct your own reconnaissance! Not run off with the girl to elope in the wilds of Scotland! That shouldn't have been too hard even for you to handle considering she was an unmarried woman allegedly plagued by a Gypsy curse!" Wickes hissed out through gritted teeth. He released Tavis and stepped back in frustration. "Do you realize what kind of danger you have

placed your new wife in? She cannot tell a lie, Tavis! Did you even think of the implications of that when you ran off with her?"

"Of course I did, Tom!" Tavis snapped in irritation. "Despite your obvious doubts, I am not a complete idiot! Her safety is my primary concern!"

"Then explain to me what happened? Why would a man, a decorated officer and a goddamned national hero no less, ignore direct orders from his chief officer to run off with some chit?" Wickes sneered at Tavis and spit out, "I don't care how plump her tits are rumored to be or how wide her arse, what possible reason could you have to explain your actions? Unless you were only thinking with your cock, that is. From all that I have heard, in spite of her oddities, she sounds like she'd be a willing partner in the bedroom."

A red haze filled Tavis's vision and he lunged at Wickes, swiftly crossing the room in one stride and pinning him to the wall with his massive body. His hands circled Wickes' neck, and he spoke through his barely controlled rage. "Don't you ever speak of my wife in those terms again, you bastard. She is a good and honest woman, better than any other woman I've known. More importantly, she is my wife, Lady Stanton, and you will treat her as the lady she is, or I will kill you with my bare hands. Do you understand me?" Wickes face had gone an alarming shade of red in his struggle to take in air, but he managed to nod.

Tavis released him, and Wickes coughed violently beating on his chest as he struggled to fill his lungs with air.

"Christ, Tavis, you nearly killed me!" Wickes accused once he had caught his breath.

"Had I wanted to kill you, you would already be dead." Tavis had retreated to the opposite side of the room and watched his friend with barely concealed hostility, the red haze of anger slow to recede.

"At least now I know why you did it." Wickes said dryly as he massaged his throat in an attempt to relieve some of the soreness there.

"What do you mean?" Tavis asked suspiciously.

"It's obvious you care for her, if not already love her." He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair clearly ignoring Tavis as he sputtered over Wickes's unexpected declaration. Letting out a big sigh, Wickes said, "This, of course, changes everything." Tavis was still too busy processing what Wickes had suggested to really understand what his friend was getting at.

Wickes shook his head in exasperation and began to explain his reasoning to Tavis as though he were a child. "If you care for her, Tavis, then it wouldn't be ethical for us to use her as we had originally planned to get the information we need to implicate her father. And now that you are married to her, well, I'm afraid that you are done with this mission, old friend. I suppose we could target the older sister, or perhaps set up a new servant in the household since Meeks has discovered nothing in all this time. I wonder if we could send in Blake. He's quite unobtrusive."

"I don't love her," Tavis finally managed to say. "We've...we've only known each other two weeks"

"Glad you finally rejoined the conversation, Tavis. I was tiring of my monologue," Wickes replied with barely concealed amusement lacing his voice. "But, yes, Tavis, whether you've realized it yet or not, you do love the woman, and as I said, that changes everything."

"I love her?" he asked in shocked amazement. His mind raced thinking of all the little ways that had changed in his life since Amelia had become a part of it. For once, he was no longer alone and had found himself a witty, good-humored companion to share his life with. It didn't hurt that she was also a beautiful, intelligent woman who shared his passions, and if asked, would share his burdens and his struggles, too. She soothed his fears and filled him with such a feeling of joy that at times his heart felt…

Oh, God! he thought. Oh*, God! This was what I've been trying to run away from since coming home! This is what I was fleeing from.* He gulped loudly and felt sick to his stomach all over again. Love.

All of a sudden, his knees felt a little weak, and he sank unsteadily to the floor leaning his head against the rough wall. He stared blankly at the empty space in front of him as he came to terms with this new epiphany. Soon, he felt a hand on his shoulder, and he looked up in surprise having completely forgotten that Wickes was still in the room with him. "I love her," he said looking at his friend in wide-eyed panic. "Oh, God! I love her! What did I do? How am I going to keep her safe now?"

Wickes put his hand on Tavis's head and pushed it forward, so it rested between his knees. "Come on, man, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth." Tavis sucked in a deep breath of air and blew it unsteadily out.

"I feel like my stomach has been ripped out my ear and then shoved back in through my nose," came Tavis's muffled voice from between his knees.

"I've heard that love can do that to a man," Wickes said conversationally. "Knocks a body flat on their arse, it does. Though I can't say as how I've ever experienced it before. Looks like nasty business to me."

Tavis pulled up his head and looked at his friend in annoyance. "You're not being particularly helpful, Wickes, so shove it in your hole, would you?"

His friend laughed long and hard. "To see your expression, Tavis! You look like a stag that knows it's been sighted and is about to be killed." Eventually his laughter faded and he chuckled thoughtfully, "I never thought you'd succumb to Cupid's arrow, but it seems I was wrong." Wickes offered his hand to Tavis and pulled him up.

"Now how about you take me to the house for some breakfast, so I can meet this lovely wife of yours?" Wickes said clapping a still dazed Tavis on the back. "I don't know about you, but all this talk of love has really

worked up an appetite!"

THE sun peering through the bedroom window had about as much to do with Amelia awakening as did the absence of her husband's warm body next to her. She looked over to where Tavis had slept the previous night and grabbed his pillow to hold in lieu of her absent husband. *Hmmm*, she breathed in deeply. *It still smells like him.*

Closing her eyes once more, she smiled dreamily thinking about how impassioned Tavis had been the night before. After waking her up from her nap in the sweetest way possible, he had apologized and had spent the rest of the afternoon and evening showing her just how sorry he was. Not only that, they had had a real talk about their marriage and about some of the feelings and concerns that they both shared after only knowing each other for such a short time. By the end of the evening, while there were no grand confessions of love and devotion, they had come to a mutual understanding of their expectations for each other and their marriage, which, she hoped, would go a long way to easing some of his fears and her anxieties.

Amelia sighed happily, all in all pleased with herself, and stretched her arms languidly above her head, wincing as several parts of her body that she didn't even know existed protested in pain.

"Good morning, my lady!" Margaret's voice chirped as she bustled about the room straightening up as she went. "From the state of this room," she said taking in the strewn clothing, rumpled covers and general disarray in her usual cheery stride, "I take it you and his lordship came to an agreement last night, hmmm?" Margaret bent over and retrieved the fallen silverware and plates that Amelia and Tavis had hastily discarded when they had been overcome by passion. Noticing an empty honey pot, she raised an eyebrow in Amelia's direction.

"Someone had a sweet tooth last night, did they?" she asked dryly.

Amelia flushed remembering where most of that honey had gone. With only a small portion ending up on Tavis's chest, he had ensured that the rest was applied in liberal strokes across every inch of her flesh. Then being the good husband he was, Tavis had diligently ensured his wife's cleanliness by removing it with his agile tongue. With the remaining liquid in the pot, he had spread those golden drops between her thighs and onto the quivering mound of her womanhood. Tavis made sure that by the time he was done not a drop of honey remained, Amelia recalled with a scorching blush. She had been shocked at first, even resistant, but Tavis had eventually persuaded her and soon, she had been writhing on the bed begging him in hoarse whispers to never stop. And afterwards when she was a tremulous bundle of nerves, he kissed her and she thrilled at the dark pleasure she tasted on his lips. Even now, picturing his dark head nestled snugly between her pale thighs as he licked and laved her to a frenzied peak of passion had her breath coming in shallow pants.

"Ahem." The not so delicate cough of her maid reminded Amelia that she had yet to respond to her earlier question.

"Yes, his lordship seems to enjoy a bit of sweet," Amelia attested in a

strangled voice.

Margaret's eyes twinkled and her mouth opened, and Amelia could just guess what horribly embarrassing question she would ask her next. Holding up her hand in protest, she said firmly, "Before you ask anything else about my personal affairs with my husband, I want you to understand that is all I am ever going to say on that subject." Amelia gratefully watched as Margaret snapped her lips together and sighed in relief; unfortunately, that relief was short lived.

"Here I was going to caution you that too much sweet could turn his lordship's stomach, my lady." She continued her busy straightening of the room and stopped mid-tidy to turn her gimlet glare on Amelia. "I don't know where your mind is this morning, my lady, but the fact that you would even suggest I would intrude on your privacy with indelicate questions, well frankly, it offends me a little."

She huffed out an injured breath and slapped her hands on her hips. Once she decided that Amelia had taken her point, Margaret stooped down to pick up Amelia's crumpled nightgown that lay in a heap at the foot of the bed. Muttering quite loudly under her breath, she said, "Hmpf. All that blue silk gone to waste." Margaret turned the nightgown around in her hands inspecting it for any tears or stains. "Obviously nothing too indelicate happened or this here nightgown wouldn't still be in one piece. Youth is wasted on the young, it is. Why in my day a man couldn't wait to..."

"Margaret!" Amelia shouted interrupting Margaret's discontented grumbling. "That's enough out of you!"

"As you wish, my lady," Margaret replied in her most deferential voice. "I'll just be preparing your bath and bringing you your breakfast." She curtsied deeply and backed out of the room. "If the Queen doesn't want anything else, I'll see to my duties, my lady." And with a flounce of her skirts and the slam of her dressing room door, Margaret left the room.

A thoroughly exasperated Amelia threw her pillow at the door, but it only landed with a soft thud on the floor, Margaret already having gone through and closed it. Margaret's amused laughter could be heard quite loudly, though, from the other side, and Amelia couldn't help but grin. Margaret was unique, that was for sure.

Some often questioned why she kept on Margaret when she went on like that. Her mother especially had said many times that she could have a French maid, one who would know her place and not ever step out of it. "How lovely that would be for you, my dear," her mother had said, "to hear a respectful "Yes, my lady," and "No, my lady," and not the impudent ramblings of that Margaret."

Every time, though, Amelia had responded, "No, thank you, mother. Margaret and I get on just fine." Her mother had been incredulous as had everyone else. No one quite understood the special bond that Amelia and Margaret shared.

After the full implications of the curse had truly set in, her mother and

father were at their wits end trying to deal with three young children who each had different afflictions, though most of the focus was on poor Evie who inexplicably could no longer speak outside of the family. Mother and father had immediately left their home in the country for London to take Evie to see the best specialists available.

In their haste to be away to London, they forgot Amelia, who had snuck away from the nursery to sleep in a spare bedroom and therefore couldn't be found when it was time to leave. Not that anyone was really looking for her as everyone was so concerned by Evie's problem and the ensuing implications for her and the family. Even nurse, who already was in serious trouble for having lost the children in the first place on that fateful day so long ago, had forgotten about Amelia in her haste to pack the children's trunks. It was Margaret, the kitchen maid, who found a scared and confused Amelia wandering the house crying for her parents. Margaret always said that she took one look at Amelia's pale, freckled face, and had decided then and there that it was her job to look after the 'little lady,' as Margaret had called her back then.

Amelia could still remember walking down the front hallway and spying Margaret, younger and less plump but full of the same energy, bustling towards her. She had looked over at Amelia and thrust out her hand and said, "Well come on then, lovie. Let's get you something to eat in the kitchen." Putting her hand trustingly in Margaret's, the two went to the kitchen and had meat pies and cake. From that day on, Margaret was devoted to her. It was Margaret who comforted her when people called her rude for telling the truth, and it was Margaret who cared for her when she became ill from lying. In many ways, she was more of a mother to her than her own was. And so, Margaret stayed in spite of everyone else's objections.

"You're bath is ready, my lady," Margaret's muffled voice called out from the next room. Amelia gratefully rose from the bed and walked to the adjoining room where the promise of a hot bath awaited.

The moment she sank her aching body into the tub, she was grateful for the hot, steamy water and could even forgive Margaret her earlier impertinence. Closing her eyes on a sigh, she allowed the hot steam to work away the tension in her sore muscles.

"His lordship has already come and gone to break his fast, my lady," Margaret said. "Brought a gentleman along with him and the two of them thick as thieves!"

Her curiosity peaked, Amelia cracked an eye. "Who was it, Margaret? Did he say?"

"As if his lordship would deem to inform a lowly lady's maid of his plans," she sniffed in feigned indignation. "Though I did ask Betty, the kitchen maid, who had it from Mrs. Dowling, the cook, who heard from Mrs. Tuddle, the housekeeper, who had spoken with Mr. Gerard, the butler, that the mysterious gentleman was none other than Mr. Wickes, a former soldier like his lordship," Margaret finished triumphantly. "They were in the same company."

While Amelia was still working out the tangle of relationships in that convoluted chain of gossip, Margaret blissfully continued her tale. “It seems that Mr. Wickes was in the area and decided to stop by on his old friend, not realizing that his lordship was otherwise occupied, him being newlywed and all.”

“Seems a trifle early to call,” mused Amelia.

“So I thought, too, my lady!” Margaret agreed. “When I asked about it, I was told that his lordship is accustomed to Mr. Wickes’s early morning calls since that is the time they like best to hunt. Or so says his lordship.”

“According to the knowledgeable Mr. Gerard?” Margaret nodded, and Amelia stifled a surge of disappointment at Tavis’s absence. She had hoped to spend the day with him or at least most of it. It was completely reasonable that he would need to spend some time away from her seeing to estate business, especially since he had been away the last week, but she had expected at least some time with him. They had only just arrived at Ballywith, and she was looking forward to a personal tour given by her husband. “Did Mr. Gerard happen to mention when his lordship would be home?”

“His lordship informed Mr. Gerard that he would be home for the noon meal.” Margaret set up a tray near the tub so that Amelia could eat while soaking. On the tray was a letter. “Now you eat your breakfast while you soak. Here’s your sister’s letter, too, if you have a mind to read it.”

With a final look around the room to ensure that everything was in its place, Margaret nodded her head in satisfaction and left Amelia to her thoughts and her sister’s letter.

Amelia sipped her tea and stared at the unopened letter. Bea had always had her secrets, even when they were little girls. It wasn’t that she was sneaky; it’s just that she always seemed to know things, and both Amelia and Evie could never figure out exactly how. For example, how did she know where to send Margaret and her trunks? How did you know she was running off with Lord Stanton when she didn’t even know who he was until the day before her wedding? And furthermore, what would Bea reveal in that letter? She was almost afraid to find out.

Setting down her tea cup, Amelia took a deep breath and opened the letter.

Dear Mimi,

Everyone has secrets, sister. Me, Evie, father, mother, you and yes, even your new husband. When you finally find out his secret, don’t condemn him for it. Remember what made you go off with him in the first place and above all trust him. He’s a good man.

Bea

Her hand clenched reflexively crumpling the paper. It fell from Amelia’s stunned hands to the floor as she stared sightlessly into the cooling water of her tub. Instead of answering her questions about what Bea knew

about her husband, her letter only served to raise more questions than it answered. What did Bea mean by saying that Tavis had secrets? How would she know what secrets he may or may not have? A small seed of jealousy blossomed in her breast at the thought of how Bea knew so much about her husband when she did not. Amelia stirred restlessly in the water as her agitation increased.

Amelia willed her breathing to slow to calm the fire burning through her blood. His slight prevarication about his full name aside, Amelia knew Tavis to be an honest man. In fact, he had wanted to clear up the misunderstanding about his name before marrying her, which had gone a long way in helping Amelia trust him. Even if Bea hadn't said that she should trust him, she owed him her trust for that reason alone. She just needed to remind herself of that and not jump to any conclusions.

A small sound at the door alerted Amelia to Margaret's return.

"I'm not ready yet, Margaret. I'll call you if I need you," Amelia said tightly.

Yet the unmistakable sounds of footsteps continued to approach across the floor.

"Margaret!" Amelia snapped testily. "I said I'd call you when I was ready."

She felt a warm hand on her shoulder. Turning sharply to glare at Margaret, she was greeted with the smiling, handsome face of her husband.

"Tavis!" she exclaimed, a burst of pleasure forming at his presence in spite of her recent doubts. "I thought you were away until later this afternoon."

"I was planning on it when I left," he explained sheepishly, "but once we were out, I was so distracted by thoughts of you that Wickes, an old friend from the army, told me to go on home to you." Tavis took up a bar of soap and worked up a lather in his hands. Taking an arm in his hand, he gently worked the fragrant suds into Amelia's skin.

She just nodded, too afraid and too unsure of whether she'd be able to speak truthfully if she opened her mouth.

Tavis finished with the one arm and had moved on to the other. "I missed you this morning for breakfast," he whispered gruffly into the tight curls at the base of Amelia's neck.

"Don't you mean at breakfast?" she corrected.

Small darts of pleasure rippled up her spine at the feeling of Tavis's warm tongue caressing the sensitive flesh behind her ears. "No," he said confidently. "I meant for breakfast."

Amelia bit her lip and thought about how she would broach the subject mentioned in her sister's letter when Tavis spied the discarded paper

on the floor.

"What's this?" Tavis asked bending over to retrieve the fallen paper from the floor.

Amelia could see the burning curiosity in his eyes as Tavis examined the crumpled paper, yet he made no move to smooth it out to better read the contents of the letter.

"It's from Bea," Amelia explained having already decided that the situation would only become worse if she tried to hide it from him. At his questioning look, Amelia urged, "Go ahead and read it."

It didn't take him long to finish, and when he did Amelia was somewhat mollified to see the same markings of confusion on his face that surely had marred hers upon reading Bea's mysterious letter. "Who exactly is your sister?" Tavis asked aloud. "How can she claim to know my secrets when I've only ever met the woman once?"

Amelia sloshed around in the water in order to see Tavis who was muttering agitatedly under his breath. "You've only met her once?" Amelia couldn't quite disguise the hope that flared in her breast at that declaration. If what he said was true, then the chances of her husband's big secret being an affair with her older sister were almost nonexistent. That made her very happy. Even though I now have no idea what he could possibly be hiding. Amelia shoved that thought aside and instead watched her husband stomping and pacing about the room.

"Is your sister some kind of a…a witch?" He turned to look at Amelia who had been grinning behind his back like some kind of deranged loon. "What are you grinning at?" With blue eyes narrowed, Tavis stared at her suspiciously, his arms folded defensively across his chest.

Amelia rose from the tub and dried off with a towel trying to buy more time before she had to answer. Slipping her arms into the sleeves of her dressing gown, she finally said, "I thought…" But then she stopped herself unsure of what to say. Because how did you explain to the man you love that you thought he had had an affair with your sister? She couldn't imagine that particular conversation going well.

Her stomach started clenching and she turned her back on Tavis so he wouldn't see her wince of pain. If she stalled, she only had so much time before she had to answer, so she blurted out, "Do you…" she gritted out past her clenched teeth. "Do you speak…" she began again, but by that point it was too late; she had waited too long. Reaching out her hand to steady herself, she leaned heavily on the wall. Dimly Amelia heard hurried footsteps behind her and felt the strong hands of her husband on her back right before she slipped out of his hold and slid down the wall to land on the floor in a heap. Staring up through a haze of pain at her husband's concerned face, she slurred out, "D'you speak Greek?" And then everything went black.

THE moment Amelia sank to the floor in a faint, Tavis panicked. "Amelia," he said urgently. "Amelia!" he repeated again taking her hands in his own and chaffing them briskly. He leaned over her body and pressed his

ear to his chest. When he heard the reassuring thud of her heart beat, he sat back on his haunches and went over the events of the last couple of minutes.

One minute he and Amelia were discussing her sister, the sneaky witch, for how else could she possibly know what secret he was keeping from Amelia? Then he had turned around and seen her grinning, so he asked about it. After that, well, everything happened rather quickly, and she had her back to him so he couldn't really see, but as far as he could tell, she was trying to ask him a question and then had doubled over in pain. When he hurried to offer her aid, she slid out of his grasp and passed out on the floor.

The door opened, and a small woman with a plump frame bustled into the room. She spied Amelia lying on the floor and rushed over to where Amelia lay still and pale on the floor.

"What did you do to her?" she demanded shooting a furious glare at Tavis. "Why is she on the floor? Did she faint?"

"We were just…. I was saying…" Tavis spluttered unintelligibly, too taken aback by this small whirlwind of a woman who was, if he weren't mistaken, eviscerating him with her eyes. Who does she think she is anyway? he thought in irritation. He was lord and master of this house, and she would do well to learn her place now. "Madam," he said in his loftiest voice, "I am Stanton, lord of this house and this lady's husband. Who are you to accuse me of wrongdoing towards my wife in my home?" He finished that little speech by crossing his arms imposingly over his chest and leveling his own cool stare at the woman.

The little termagant didn't back down, though, as Tavis had expected. What she did do was to push Tavis out of the way and kneel by Amelia's side. Taking Amelia's hand in her own, she put two of her fingers on the inside of her wrist all the while muttering under her breath. Then the nervy she-troll took out a small vile of liquid and unstopped it. Placing one or two drops on her fingers, she massaged the liquid at the base of Amelia's wrists and behind her head. Margaret stood and walked to the chair placed by the fire. Over its back draped a fine, woven blanket that she grabbed and placed over Amelia's still form.

Her immediate assessment and care of Amelia complete, she finally acknowledged Tavis, who had grown only angrier in Margaret's silence. "I am Margaret, my lord, Lady Amelia's maid and servant since she was no more than eight years old." Margaret tilted her to meet Tavis's gaze. "I figure I've been more of a mother to her than her own was, and weren't I the one who always nursed her since she were young?"

Though he knew it was a rhetorical question, Tavis felt compelled to answer given Margaret's intense, steely-eyed stare that was making him feel like a naughty schoolboy being scolded by his governess. "But of course," he mumbled feeling that much more the fool for being cowed by his wife's lady maid.

Margaret nodded. "And seeing as how I was her nurse and maid, I know that the only times my lady ever takes ill like this is if she has told a lie. Now I ask you again, my lord, what did you ask my lady that she would rather

make herself ill and faint than to answer it?"

The tension in Tavis's body eased somewhat as he realized the cause of his wife's seemingly unexplainable sickness. Of course it was the curse! Because he had not seen it in their two weeks together as Amelia had only ever been honest and open with him, he did not know what to expect. Now that he knew it was a lie that had brought upon her faint, he felt somewhat more at ease. Yet if she fainted, he mused, it must mean that my question had upset her in some way, otherwise she would have answered it honestly and not be unconscious on the floor. He tried to recall what they had been talking about before she fainted.

"I had asked her why she was smiling," he responded slowly as he replayed their conversation in his head.

"That doesn't make much sense." Margaret looked as confused as he felt. She tapped her finger on her chin in thought. "Maybe there was something before that? There's got to be something else that would have made her clamp up and refuse to tell the truth."

"We were discussing the letter that her sister sent her, which was disturbing in and of itself." Tavis felt the anger returning as he wondered again what it was his new sister-in-law could possibly know about him.

Margaret nodded her head sagely. "Bea certainly knows how to disturb a body. What did she say in her letter?"

Tavis glared at Margaret and debated whether or not to call her out for her impertinence. Chances were, though, if he did reprimand her she would only stare at him with those beady little eyes of hers until he broke down and answered her anyway. *Might as well save her the effort of glaring at least.* "In her letter, she told Amelia that I had secrets, but that she wasn't supposed to condemn me for them when she found out."

He refused to squirm under Margaret's steady gaze while she contemplated what he said. They passed several moments that way, the two locked in an intense battle of wills. Finally, she nodded as though satisfied with what she saw reflected in his eyes and said in that no-nonsense voice of hers, "I won't be asking you if you do have secrets because in my experience most men do." She held up her hand in defense when Tavis began to protest. "You know I speak true, my lord. No sense in denying it."

Motioning to the floor where Amelia still lay unconscious, she said, "You might as well pick her up and bring her to bed. It could be hours before she awakens again."

Tavis lifted his wife carefully into his arms being mindful to protect her head as he walked through the door into the master chambers. Laying her under the counterpane, he was suddenly struck at how fragile she looked and realized that he had never thought of her in those terms before. She was naturally so vibrant and full of life that it was difficult for him to reconcile the woman he had come to know with this pale, delicate creature in the bed before him.

“You can go about your day if you wish, my lord,” Margaret stated as she moved a chair closer to the bedside to better tend Amelia. “I’ll sit with her until she awakens. Don’t you worry.” She moved to sit in the chair, but Tavis’s hand on her upper arm stopped her.

“I will watch her, Margaret. She is my wife, and I will care for her.” For a moment, it seemed like Margaret would protest, but she must have noted the determined set of Tavis’s jaw and realized it would be useless to argue with him.

“Right you are, my lord.” Walking briskly into the adjoining room, she returned moments later carrying a small basin of water and a dry cloth. “If she gets hot, you can wipe her brow with a damp cloth. Sometimes it helps to put the cloth on the back of her neck, too.”

Tavis nodded and sat in the chair that Margaret had pulled over. He took one of Amelia’s limp, cold hands into his own and asked, “What about that liquid I saw you put on her wrists and neck? Should I do that again?”

“I shouldn’t think so. It was just a bit of lavender oil to calm her down, you see. Every time she has one of these spells, her heart gets to racing so fast I worry it will pump clean out of her chest. I found that a little lavender oil on her wrist and neck helped to calm her, even while unconscious.” She took the small vial out of her apron pocket and put it next to the basin. “Here. I’ll leave it with you just in case she starts getting restless again.”

“Thank you, Margaret,” he said with surprising grace, never once taking his eyes off of Amelia where she lay on the bed. “I will call you if I have need of you.”

Margaret curtsied and walked to the door. “My lord?” Tavis turned and spied Margaret standing hesitantly in the doorway. “I know you will have your secrets, my lord. It’s only natural.” She paused and seemed to be searching for what to say, something, he doubted, she had to do very often. “I would only hope...when she does find out what it is, that she won’t be hurt too bad.” Margaret looked over to where Amelia lay on the bed and smiled a tender, motherly smile. “She’s a special person, my lord, so kind and trusting.” Her voice wobbled a bit, and she curtsied again before reaching for the door knob. “Ring for me if I am needed.”

Tavis turned around and lifted Amelia’s small hand gently to his mouth to bestow a soft kiss on it. He heard the unmistakable sound of the door opening and then Margaret's voice from the doorway, softly imploring. “Please...please don’t hurt her, my lord.” When he turned around to tell her he didn’t plan to, the door had already closed and Margaret was gone.

Chapter 16

IT wasn't until the next morning that Amelia finally made it downstairs to breakfast. She had slept the entire day and night through, which sometimes happened after she had an episode. Though Tavis wasn't there when she awakened, Amelia knew that he had been with her throughout the day and evening. There was a chair next to the bed and a Tavis-sized impression on the bed next to her, so he had to have been with her. Plus, she could have sworn that she had heard his voice through the fog of pain that had wrapped her in unconsciousness for the better part of a day and evening.

About halfway down the stairs, she realized that she didn't even know where the breakfast room was, having only taken her breakfast in her room since arriving at Ballywith. As there was not a footman in sight, Amelia wandered to the lower level and began poking her nose into rooms hoping that one of the rooms would lead to breakfast.

Upon opening the third door, she thought she heard the low timbre of her husband's voice. Following it through one room and into another, she had her hand on the knob when an unfamiliar voice spoke up.

"Have you found out anything more from her?" the unknown voice asked.

"No," Tavis sighed wearily. "I've told you everything she's told me already. Aside from the name Harry the Horse, she has not said anything else of what she overheard from her small nook. Besides," Tavis continued, "I thought you did not want to use her for information anymore."

Amelia started when she heard Tavis discussing with his friend the information she had shared with him about her secret nook. Of what importance could it be to Tavis or his friend? She pressed her ear more closely to the door. Perhaps one of them would say something that would give her an idea of what secret her husband was keeping from her.

"Have you heard of anyone that goes by that name, Wickes?" Tavis asked.

"I thought perhaps there was someone…" Wickes's voice trailed off, "but it can't be him because he's been dead for years."

A chair scraped on the floor, making it difficult for Amelia to hear what Tavis had just said. She just caught the tail end of Wickes's reply.

"...and there was no one by that name at Westby house."

"Then who did we send in to Westby house?"

"I said that no one knew the name Jeremiah Meeks, but when I described Meeks to them, they knew exactly who I was talking about. Do you remember Amelia talking about her father's houseguest?"

"Yes," Tavis grit out. "Vividly."

"No one knew who Jeremiah Meeks was, it's true, but from the description I gave them they all recognized him as one Jeremy Michelson, the Westby's long time houseguest."

"That bastard!" Tavis's furious shout echoed loudly throughout the room startling Amelia in the process.

Jeremy! she thought in a panic slapping her hand over her mouth to stifle her surprised gasp. *Why are they talking about him?* Quickly pressing her ear once more to the door, she heard Tavis yell again, "He lied to me!"

"He lied to all of us, Tavis. No one knew of his other identity or at the game he was playing." Wickes sighed, and Amelia wondered how her husband and this Mr. Wickes knew Jeremy and why they were so upset that he had lied to them?

Mr. Wickes was talking again! "But now that we know, we can search for him. It's obvious that Westby planted Meeks with you to act as courier between you and your father when you were both stationed in France. Think, Tavis," Wickes demanded. "Did you ever receive any correspondence from home in all the time you were on the Continent?"

My father? Why are they talking about my father like this? What is going on? Amelia nervously chewed on her nails and waited impatiently to hear more from Tavis. Unfortunately, the more she heard, the more confused she became. Nothing was making any sense!

"No, never, Tom," Tavis said, and Amelia could hear him begin to pace impatiently across the floors. "You know that my father hated me. I never…" The pacing suddenly stopped.

Wickes pounced at Tavis's falter. "What? What is it Tavis?"

"Once." His voice had become low and hoarse, so Amelia had to strain to hear. "I received one letter from my father in all the time I was stationed in France." There was a pause in which Amelia could hear the pounding of her own blood in her veins. "I...I didn't even look at it when Meeks brought it to me. I told him to get rid of it, and he obviously did. I never saw it again."

"Your father was probably betting on the fact that you wouldn't read anything from him which would have given Meeks the perfect opportunity to read the letter and pass on whatever information was written within it."

"I don't understand. Surely the War Department was reading letters before they were sent abroad. Any incriminating information would have been stopped and the traitor discovered. How did my father get away with it?"

The War Department? Amelia wondered. *What is Tavis doing involved with the War Department?*

"An encoded message. It had to be otherwise you are right; it would have been stopped. That's why Meeks showed up out of nowhere to be your batman. Once your father realized you were going abroad, he and Westby

must have arranged to send Meeks along to intercept it and carry it on to whoever their contact is in France."

"Did you find out where Meeks had gone, Tom?"

"When I asked, none of the servants knew. All they could tell me was that he left a week ago Friday, but no one knew where."

"Which means he could be anywhere, including here in Stanton."

This time Amelia did gasp out loud. *Jeremy here in Stanton? Near Ballywith?* She quickly backed away from the door, and in the process, she knocked into a side table sending a vase crashing to the floor. The talking from the other room stopped, and afraid that she would be caught, Amelia hiked up her skirts and ran out the door.

"STUPID, stubborn man!" Amelia yelled as she stomped angrily into the gardens off the side of the house. She kicked at a small bush along the side of the main path and instantly regretted it when her foot connected with the solid trunk of the bush.

"Ouch!" Hopping unsteadily on one foot, Amelia managed to make it a little ways down the path where a small wrought iron bench sat underneath a flowering tree. Sinking onto the seat, she took off her slipper, now stained from its contact with the bush, and lifted her foot up to examine it for any injuries. Aside from a small bruise that seemed to be forming on the side of her foot, she was fine physically, at least. She wasn't too sure how she was feeling emotionally right now.

That her husband was keeping something from her was now obvious, but what that secret entailed was no longer clear. If it had been a simple affair with her sister, Mr. Wickes most likely wouldn't be involved, and he most definitely knew whatever Tavis was keeping from her. In fact, according to the imperious Mr. Wickes, who she had yet to meet, Amelia learned that whatever it was could prove dangerous to...Tavis? To her? That's where she was unclear.

"If only he would trust me with what is burdening him, then I could help him," she muttered aloud.

"Men do tend to keep things close to themselves, don't they? And yours especially."

Amelia started and looked wildly around the garden trying to identify the mysterious voice that had suddenly come from nowhere."Who's there?" she demanded rubbing her arms against the sudden chill in the air.

From out of the dark shadows of a sheltering grove of trees stepped an old woman. Though slightly stooped from age, her bearing remained proud and erect. Her hair was thick but gray, making it impossible for Amelia to tell what color it might have been when she had been younger. Fine lines adorned the woman's face, but especially around her eyes and mouth, a testament to the joys and sorrows she must have lived through. Dressed simply in a gown of fine, silver cloth, she wore no other adornments save for a magnificent

hand-woven shawl of startling green, the same shade as her eyes Amelia hazily noted, draped gracefully around her shoulders.

"Who are you?" Amelia asked cautiously.

The old woman walked over to where Amelia sat clutching her dirty slipper in a white knuckled grip and sat down next to her on the bench. "I'm just an old woman passing through, but you can call me Jane if you'd like." Jane had an amused smile on her face, and Amelia wondered what could possibly be making her smile in such a manner.

"I'm Lady Amelia Stanton," Amelia said faintly, still too taken aback by the sudden appearance of this woman to truly credit what was happening.

"I thought you might be," Jane said again, that same amused smile gracing her face.

"How…" Amelia swallowed and began again, "how could you possibly know that?" For a moment, Amelia feared that Jane might be a Gypsy. The last time she had been set upon by an elderly woman alone in the outdoors had not turned out well for her or her family. She dearly hoped that Jane was not a Gypsy.

Jane patted her on her arm in a familiar, grandmotherly fashion. "Oh, you know how word gets around. People love to gossip, especially when it involves a young, handsome earl suddenly marrying a beautiful titian haired woman from London. I just made an educated guess when I saw you sitting here."

Said like that, Amelia sighed, thinking that Jane was probably just a local woman who had wandered up towards Ballywith on her daily walk to see the new Countess of Stanton for herself. "Do you know my husband or his family very well, Jane?"

This time, Jane outright laughed. "You could say that, my dear!" Amelia waited to see if Jane would elaborate, but the perplexing woman remained silent, her laughing eyes trained intently on Amelia.

"What did you mean about my husband keeping things closely to himself? Do you know what he's keeping from me?" Amelia asked in a desperate attempt to discover what her husband could be hiding.

Instantly, Jane's eyes sobered and misted over as she stared off into the distance, lost in memories of the past. Finally, she nodded solemnly, her thoughts having returned to the present. "Yes, yes I believe I do know what he is hiding from you, and no, my dear," she said shaking her head sadly, "I cannot tell you what it is."

Amelia balled up her fists tighter until the hard sole of her shoe cut into the tender flesh of her palm. "Why won't he trust me?"

Jane took the shoe from Amelia's hand and smoothed out the creases that she had made in her anger and frustration. Setting it on her lap, Jane absently rubbed the palm of her own hand, almost exactly where Amelia was

now wrapping a handkerchief over hers to staunch the bleeding from the cut on her palm. “Careful,” Jane said absently as she massaged that same point on her palm. “You could leave a mark.”

“Can you tell me anything useful?” Amelia demanded growing frustrated with Jane’s cryptic comments and unanswered questions. She tied off the handkerchief and re-balled her fist. “Like how I’m supposed to help my husband when he won’t tell me what’s going on?”

“I think you already know the answer to that question, Amelia,” Jane said gently.

Jumping up in anger, Amelia threw her hands to the sky and plunked them on her hips. “No, Jane!” she shouted at the old woman. “No, I don’t know the answer. That’s why I’m asking you!”

Once again, Jane’s eyes grew misty, as if she were looking back through the veils of time. “I had forgotten…” she said softly, placing Amelia’s shoe on the bench. As she slowly began to rise, she said distantly, “I had forgotten how passionate youth could be.”

“Amelia!” Tavis’s shouted voice could be heard faintly in the distance. Amelia knew that Tavis would have seen her hurried flight from the house and would have guessed that she had overheard his conversation with his friend, Mr. Wickes. He would want to know what she had heard, but right now, she needed to know what Jane knew and she needed to know now!

Jane shook her head as though to clear it from a fog, and turned to Amelia taking her hands in her own. “It is time for me to leave.”

“But...but you haven’t answered any of my questions.” Amelia knew she sounded desperate, but she was. Jane had only raised more questions than she had answered, and she was more confused now than she was before her talk with Jane. “How am I going to make him trust me?”

“You’re not asking the right question, Amelia,” Jane said patiently. “Instead of asking how you can get your husband to trust you, you should be asking yourself why he doesn’t.”

“Fine, then,” Amelia huffed out impatiently. “Why doesn’t he trust me?”

“I think you know the answer to that, Amelia,” Jane countered softly.

Amelia thought for but a second, then dejectedly, she nodded. She had known all along that if Tavis were keeping something from her, it had to be something big, something that could endanger either one or both of them. He would keep it to himself; he would have to. No one confided in Amelia, not unless they wanted to run the risk of having their innermost thoughts and feelings shared with the world should someone ask the right question. And she hated that. Hated not being trustworthy, and that’s why Tavis most likely refused to divulge whatever it was that he was keeping from her.

“The curse,” she whispered. “He can’t trust me because he can’t be

sure that I won't be forced to tell the truth."

"Amelia!" Tavis's voice shouted more loudly than before. He was getting closer.

"What do I do, Jane?" Amelia asked clutching tightly to Jane's hands.

"It's time for me to leave," she repeated removing her hands from Amelia's tight hold. Jane walked slowly back to the awaiting darkness in the tree grove.

"Please!" Amelia begged. "Tell me! What should I do?"

Jane stopped and looked over her shoulder to where Amelia stood, desperately hugging herself about the middle, as if her arms were the only things holding her emotions together.

"Break the curse, Amelia. That's the only way." Jane turned around again and walked into the darkness on the other side of the path.

"I've tried!" Amelia called. "I...I don't know how, Jane," Amelia cried to the darkness that had enfolded the old woman in its ghostly embrace.

Then from a distance, as if traveling through time itself came the faint echo of Jane's parting words. "The curse only has power over you for as long as you allow it, Mimi." Amelia blanched and took an unsteady step back until her knees hit the edge of the wrought iron bench. Sinking onto it she wondered how Jane could have possibly known the exact words that her sister Bea had said to her all those weeks ago when she had told Amelia to stop letting her curse take over her life. How had Jane known?

A cold lick of fear shivered up and down her spine, and Amelia rubbed her chilled arms. She was contemplating returning to the house when Jane's voice once again reached her ears but not faint like her last message had been. This time, she spoke forcefully into her ears. "Hurry and break it, Amelia! You are going to be tested sooner than he thinks!" Amelia jumped and looked next to her, expecting to see Jane once more sitting regally beside her, so loud was Jane's final advice; however, when she looked, there was no one beside her. The inky darkness that had enveloped Jane in the tree grove when she had disappeared was gone only to be replaced by faint rays of sunlight that filtered through the waving branches to create a dazzling dappled effect on the bushes and flowers.

Wasting no time in replacing her shoe, she sprang up off the bench and blindly began running down the main path back to the house.

"Amelia!" he shouted again, but closer this time. Hiking up her green skirts, she started trotting faster towards him. Spying him rapidly approaching, she picked up speed and ran straight into his arms.

"Amelia!" he exclaimed. "You're trembling!"

She buried her head onto his chest and took in several shaky breaths to slow her rapidly beating heart. "Do you believe in ghosts, Tavis?" she

finally asked.

"Ghosts? he asked curiously. "Don't tell me you saw one wandering the gardens, Amelia, *mia."* He laughed softly but stopped when she shook her head yes.

Raising her head she said through trembling lips, "I...I think I saw one."

"You aren't hurt are you?" he asked with true concern in his voice.

"No, just a little shaken," she admitted with a rueful smile.

"As long as you're unhurt, then there's nothing to worry about." He kissed her soundly on the lips, and as always, her passions quickly began to rise. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulled herself flush against Tavis's solid, reassuring body and tangled her fingers into his hair. Darting her tongue swiftly into his mouth, she reveled at the dark, salty flavor of his mouth. Sucking gently on his lower lip, she was rewarded with a throaty growl from deep in his chest. He grabbed her around the waist and trailed kisses on her neck and down to her shoulders.

"I heard you talking to your friend Mr. Wickes this morning," Amelia accused breathlessly, Tavis's gentle kisses having turned more lingering and intimate.

His kisses stopped, and he slowly raised his head to look at Amelia with a mixture of suspicion and dread on his face. "What did you hear?"

"A lot of things," she responded vaguely, "but mostly that you and he share a secret that you are unwilling to tell me."

He nodded his head warily. "That's true. Are you angry with me?"

"I was, mind you, but not anymore," she replied honestly, and was pleased when he resumed his attentions to her neck and collarbone.

"Did your conversation with the ghost change your mind?" he teased, his gentle laughter tickling the tops of her breasts.

"Joke all you want, Tavis," Amelia said seriously as she leaned her head back to allow him better access to her throat and chest, "but she made me understand why you can't tell me what I want to know. I understand now, and I want you to know it's alright."

"She?" he asked suspiciously straightening from where he had been engaged in tormenting her trembling breasts from their perch over her bodice.

Quickly, Amelia related what had happened to her with Jane. When she was done, he looked more worried than when she had first told him she had seen a ghost.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her back to where she had seen Jane. She sat on the bench and watched him walk to the tree grove and back. "Find

anything?" He came out of the tree grove shaking his head. "Nothing. I guess you were right; it must have been a ghost."

Amelia shivered again, and he moved to sit next to her. Wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he pulled her close. "I am curious. What did she help you figure out?"

"That what is preventing you from trusting me fully is me." She looked into his eyes and continued steadily, "That you want to trust me, but know that my curse makes it difficult for you to confide in me."

"I want to lass, more than anything, but not all of the secret is mine to tell."

"Then how is that Bea knows it?" she asked tremulously. "Did you have an affair with her? Is that how she knows?"

"What? God no!" he stated in surprise. "What would have given you that idea?"

"Her letter," she shrugged. "I thought she must know because of what she said."

"You concluded that, did you?" he asked mildly. "I told you yesterday I only ever met your sister one time, and it's not one I am keen on remembering. She took me for a hundred pounds at the tables and was most unladylike about it too."

She sighed out a breath she didn't know she had been holding. "I remember you saying that yesterday, but I needed to be sure. It's actually what I was trying to avoid saying yesterday when I fainted."

"You were going to ask me if I had had an affair with your sister?" he asked incredulously. "Why didn't you say so in the first place, and you could have avoided all the pain you caused yourself."

Amelia fiddled with the folds of her skirt, avoiding Tavis's gaze. "I didn't know how to say it without upsetting you."

"So instead of risking my anger, you'd rather make yourself sick?"

Amelia rose and walked over to a hydrangea bush to bury her nose in a fragrant bloom and nodded, still refusing to meet Tavis's eye.

Tavis watched Amelia as she stood there in front of the flower bush with her shoulders hunched defensively against the lingering morning chill, and he caught his breath. The light from the morning sun floated in tiny motes through the towering tree branches overhead and gilded her hair until it seemed to glow like a bright flame about her head. Her skin was almost translucent, so pale it looked next to the brilliance of her hair. He marveled again at how fragile she really was, and his heart clenched tightly. Without quite knowing how he was going to approach her to calm her fears, he did know he needed to tread carefully.

Slowly approaching his wife, he cupped her chin in the palm of his hand and looked earnestly into his wife's eyes. "You don't have to worry about telling the truth, lass. I won't run away if you tell me something you think I won't like." He saw her flinch at his words and with that slight movement he knew that he had found the truth behind her evasive actions.

"That's what you say now," she said quietly pulling away from his embrace. She sidled to the other side of the bush to keep some distance between her and Tavis, using that bush as a shield to protect her fragile and exposed emotions. "Everyone thinks they want the truth until confronted with it."

She sighed, and he wished he could take away the pain of every hurtful word and every rejection she had ever received. His chest grew a little tighter as he thought back to the panic and fear he had felt yesterday when she fell ill, and he finally experienced the terror that was her curse. If he had his way, years would pass before he had to experience those feelings again, yet he knew it could happen again tomorrow if Amelia felt like she had to protect others from her truth. He had to make her see that when she was with him, she was safe to tell the truth.

"I'm not like everyone else, Amelia. If you make me angry with your truth, I won't take offense and leave you to yourself. It must have been lonely for you all those years telling a truth no one wanted to hear. I can imagine that people didn't take too kindly to your candor, did they?" he asked. "You never have to be alone again, lass, not as long as I am with you. Though I'm begging you, please, tell me the truth. I don't know that I'm strong enough to watch you become ill and know I am helpless to do anything about it."

Several heartbeats passed in which Tavis willed Amelia to hear and understand what he was saying. He hadn't been exaggerating when he said he didn't know if he was strong enough to watch her struggle with the pain of her curse year after year. Yesterday after she had fallen and had not awakened had been the most terrifying experience of his life. For the first time in his twenty-eight years of life, he knew what it meant to be truly afraid. He also knew that something had to change, and Tavis fervently hoped his reassurances and his constant presence would help to bring about that change in Amelia.

"Mother always said that my curse was the easiest to bear. I could speak, unlike Evie who was mostly mute, and every other word out of my mouth wasn't a lie, like Bea's. Mother said that telling the truth would be refreshing, and that people would find my candor charming." Her voice was barely a whisper, but at least she was talking again.

"That must have been hard to not have anyone who understood."

"Bea and Evie did to an extent. We were always close, but after that day we became even closer. We learned to cope and how to control it, but it never became any easier." Amelia looked up finally from the flowers that she had been staring at, and Tavis flinched at the raw pain that he saw reflected there. "She was wrong, you know. People don't want the truth. They want to hear a version of the truth that fits with their narrow view of the world. I found that out early on when my light revealed the ugliness in people's souls. People prefer the dark, Tavis, because coming out into the light hurts too

much."

He wrapped his arms around Amelia's stiff body and held on until he felt the tension leave her frame. "I wish I could make you believe me, Amelia, but only time will prove that my words are sincere. I promise to never take offense and run away for telling me the truth."

She allowed him to hold her, letting his strength bolster her confidence and lay her fears to rest. Amelia wanted to believe Tavis, she truly did, but more than that, she wanted Tavis to believe in her. She wanted to be the one that Tavis confided in, the one he turned to with his secrets and his thoughts. Until her curse was broken, though, how could she ask him to trust her when she didn't even trust herself?

Chapter 17

OVER the next several days, Amelia became acquainted with her new home under the watchful eye of Mrs. Tuddle, the housekeeper. A short, gray haired women of indeterminate years, Mrs. Tuddle had been the housekeeper since before Tavis's mother had passed. She was fiercely loyal to the former Lady Stanton, and those loyalties extended over the years to include first the former Earl of Ballywith, Tavis's deceased brother John, and now to Tavis himself.

It soon became clear to Amelia that Mrs. Tuddle had been running the household for the last several years as John and Mary's health worsened and the two eventually died. Mrs. Tuddle was very efficient and organized, a fact that Amelia appreciated; she learned more with Mrs. Tuddle in two days about running a household as large as Ballywith than she had ever learned from her mother in all the years that she had instructed the girls on managing a large estate.

The household was run really quite efficiently, and there was not much for Amelia to do but approve expenses and oversee the care of the servants and the tenants. Mrs. Tuddle was also bluntly honest with Amelia and informed her in no uncertain terms that without a large influx of money, the estate would be operating with a deficit by the end of the year. Throughout the morning, the two women had poured over the household ledgers to find some way to squeeze any extra funds from existing resources.

Between the two of them, they had come up with several ways in which they could further slash expenses, though Mrs. Tuddle was reluctant to cut so deeply. Amelia had little desire to do so, either, but something needed to be done to rectify the bleakness of the situation at Ballywith. Mrs. Tuddle had thoroughly explained the various expenses that had cropped up over the years and how that had depleted the resources of the estate. Ballywith was really in dire financial straits, and Amelia knew something that would immediately help their situation.

Walking down the hallway to her husband's study, she was stopped by Gerard, the butler. When informed that Tavis was in the stables, Amelia went to her room to grab her shawl as the days still remained cool, something she hadn't quite grown accustomed to.

Over the last several weeks, Amelia had quickly settled into her new home, loving the raw power of the rugged landscape of Ballywith and the surrounding land. Towering peaks still dusted with the last remnants of winter reached proudly to the sky, while the deep valleys around those peaks had just burst forth with the first hardy shoots of pale green, spring grass interspersed with the faint violet of the heather that would someday soon carpet the valleys with its rich, vibrant hues. Spring had finally arrived--Amelia had only to look outside at the bowers of blossoms on the hundreds of trees that dotted the grounds or at the triumphant flowers that had burst through the ground over the course of these past weeks to know it. She just wished it wasn't so cold!

Wrapping up tightly in her warm woolen shawl, Amelia left her room to find Tavis in the stables and to have this particular piece of business past her. No matter how idyllic and content she had been this past month, her

elopement and the way she had just disappeared without a word to her parents made her uncomfortable. She needed to see her parents if only to explain to them what had happened to her in the last several weeks. While there, she would talk to her father about her dowry, funds which would go a long way to restoring the estate. It would be an easy trip down to London and back as she didn't envision staying more than a few days. In all, it was a well thought out plan.

Amelia chewed on her lower lip as she thought about how she was going to convince her husband to let her go. Ever since the incident with Jane, Tavis had been unusually cautious about her safety. Though he had claimed to have found nothing out of the ordinary amongst the grove of trees, his actions indicated otherwise. He wanted to know where she was at all times and insisted on escorting her if she ventured out of doors. In fact, she was surprised that he hadn't arranged for one of the footmen to walk her to the stables since he was obviously unavailable. Maybe he thought she couldn't get into too much trouble on the path from the house to the stables. Pausing on the landing, she spied the young footman William, her constant shadow when Tavis was unavailable, waiting for her at the front entrance. She sighed, "Then again maybe not."

"Lady Stanton?" William looked up to where Amelia still stood standing on the first floor landing. "Might I accompany you to his Lordship?"

Stifling the urge to curse, she smiled sweetly at the boy. "But of course, William. I would appreciate the escort." *Really*, she fumed in exasperation, but then had to reminder herself that it wasn't his fault. *No, it's not William's fault that Tavis had made him my honorary guardsman.* Regardless of how it has hampered her freedom, as William took his guardianship of her safety very seriously. Over the past several days William was always present whenever she decided to take a walk around the grounds or sit in the gardens outside the kitchen. He was always polite, never once insisting that he accompany her, even though she knew that those were his orders. Instead, he asked her for permission to attend her should she need the assistance. When stated in such a manner, how could she refuse? It would look churlish and ill-mannered to decline such gentlemanly solicitousness, especially when it was for her benefit.

Somehow, she needed to convince her husband to either confide in her his worries or to allow her more latitude in her movements. But how to convince him?

"My lady?" William's worried voice brought her to attention, and she realized that she had been staring at William for several minutes while she considered her predicament.

Amelia hurried down the stairs and grabbed onto William's arm. "Before you escort me to his Lordship, William, I'd like to stop by the kitchens and see Mrs. Dowling, first."

The kitchen, Amelia had since learned, was one of the only remaining structures of the castle from when it was first constructed. Built into the side of a large rock formation, the kitchen was a sturdy room that had survived through war, the vagaries of the weather, and several fires that had plagued

the castle since its erection. Constructed of sturdy stone it preserved the warmth during the long, cold days of winter, and it keep the room cool in those rare hot days of summer. Only two narrow windows had been built into the original foundation, both of which faced south to catch any feeble rays of sun that happened to shine in the dead of winter. Down that same small hallway to the rear of the huge fireplace, there was a sturdy wooden door between the two windows that allowed servants to enter and exit to the walled in kitchen garden and courtyard. Despite its age, it was an efficient, well-lit room run under the watchful eye of Mrs. Dowling, the robust cook who had served the family since she herself was a young girl hired on to be a kitchen maid.

"Mrs. Dowling?" Amelia inquired loudly as she descended the remaining steps into the warm kitchen. "Are you here, Mrs. Dowling?" Amelia peered her head around the open door carefully. The last time she had made an unscheduled visit to the kitchen, the woman had nearly torn her asunder at the intrusion during one of her busiest times. Upon learning it was the new mistress, the cook apologized but was no less irritated by the unwelcome visit. Amelia was advised that the next time she visited, she should either give warning or call down ahead.

Since no one answered her call, Amelia walked into the kitchen with William close behind. Though the fire blazed in the fireplace and there was evidence on the table that staff had been busily preparing the next meal, there was no one about.

"That's odd," Amelia reflected aloud as she took in the empty kitchen. "William, do you know where everyone is?"

"No, my lady, I do not."

Amelia moved down the small hallways to peer out the two windows. Squinting through the murky glass, her eyes suddenly widened as she thought she saw a glimpse of a familiar green, shawl. "Jane," she whispered. Turning rapidly around she spied William watching her intently. "I'd like to go outside, William. See if Mrs. Dowling is about."

"My lady…" William began, "his Lordship is waiting for you. I should really take you to him."

"I need to go find Mrs. Dowling," Amelia insisted impatiently resisting the urge to peer out of the window again in hopes of spying Jane. She prayed that Jane would still be there by the time she got out. If she got out.

"I should go with you, my lady," William said shifting nervously from foot to foot. "Or at least, tell me what you wish from Mrs. Dowling and I will give her your message later."

Swiftly returning to the main room of the kitchen, she pulled out a stool and dragged it down the hall and placed it by the door. "Here," Amelia explained. "You sit on this stool with the door slightly ajar, and I will go and find Mrs. Dowling and speak to her myself."

At William's continued doubtful expression, she crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "William Douglas, I didn't want to do this, but if you don't sit here and allow me to speak with Mrs. Dowling privately, I will tell his lordship what I saw you and Katy Ferguson doing the other day when she was supposed to be cleaning the downstairs and you were supposed to be watching the front door." Amelia glared angrily at him, upset that she had to use the one advantage she had over William to go out to the gardens, but it had to be done.

Poor William whitened to the color of new milk and gulped loudly. "You saw that, my lady?"

"Yes, I did, and if you want to keep it secret, you'll let me leave right now," she finished angrily pushing him onto the stool.

William reluctantly sat and gulped even harder. "He'll kill me, my lady, if something were to happen to you, and I weren't there to stop it."

She huffed out an impatient breath, afraid that with every passing minute Jane would be gone by the time she convinced William to let her enter the garden unattended. "What could happen to me in the garden? It's walled, for goodness sake. Plus, you'll be watching from here and can rush to my aid if anything were to go wrong."

"You promise that you'll turn back if something isn't right?" William asked uneasily.

"Yes, yes," she promised rashly. "I promise. Now will you let me go?" The sound of her foot tapping impatiently on the hard stones of the floor echoed loudly throughout the small hallway.

He nodded and opened the door. Amelia rushed gratefully out into the garden and glanced wildly for the sight of Jane's vivid green shawl. Rushing between the rows of newly planted seeds, she thought she spied what she was looking for towards the rear of the garden where several clinging ivies had started to climb up the walls once again.

"Jane!" she yelled as she raced towards the wall. "Wait!" But by the time she reached the wall, the only sight that greeted her was the fluttering green of an old, ragged cloth someone had tied to a stake to detract birds from destroying the garden. As Amelia looked up and down the garden, she noticed similar flutterings of differently colored cloths interspersed throughout the garden. Jane had never been here after all.

Headless of the damage it would do to her gown, she sank heavily onto the ground next to the stake that had caused her hurried flight out into the garden in the first place. She could have sworn that she had seen a figure in the garden and not just the color of Jane's shawl. Hadn't she? Amelia rubbed her forehead and tried to think. Maybe Jane really was all in her imagination like Tavis had suggested. It had just felt so real at the time. So deep in concentration was she, she missed the approach of Mrs. Dowling.

"My lady? Amelia snapped her head up and saw true concern etched into the round features of her portly cook. "Young William said you wanted to

speak with me?"

"I..I did. Yes, I do." Amelia glanced around in confusion and spied the tall, lanky form of William disappear behind the heavy, wooden door.

"Let me help you up, my lady," the cook kindly said as she offered her outstretched arm to Amelia. Grasping it, Amelia rose and looked around the garden. "I came out to see you, but couldn't find you Mrs. Dowling."

"That's because I was working in a sheltered spot just over there," she explained pointing to a location off in the distance. "I keep my herbs over there. Some of them need a bit more coddling than others, so they get a special spot near the kitchen where they can absorb some of the heat from the stones. William knew where to find me, though."

Amelia silently thanked the amorous William for his timely intervention. Had he not found Mrs. Dowling when he had, Amelia might still be sitting on the ground questioning her sanity. Mrs. Dowling's arrival brought a welcome reprieve from her distracted thoughts."You know a lot about plants and herbs, Mrs. Dowling?"

"I should say so!" Her stout chest puffed with pride. "The local healer uses many of my herbs for her remedies. Says as how I can grow the plants that will grow for no one else."

"Will you show me?" Amelia asked curiously. As mistress, she wanted to become more acquainted with the servants and their interests. Mrs. Dowling's interest just happened to be something she had always wanted to know more about.

Walking over to the wall bordering the huge crag of Ballywith, Amelia examined the part of the wall that Mrs. Dowling claimed to have been working behind. It extended straight out from the corner where the kitchen wall and the mount met to a distance of some fifty feet beyond the kitchen. On closer inspection, though, Amelia could see a sort of double wall forming, where a shorter wall protruded from the side of the kitchen and butted out in front of the longer expanse of wall. The two walls blended perfectly with one another, making it impossible from a distance to tell that there were in fact two distinct walls. It was behind this shorter wall that Mrs. Dowling took Amelia.

"Here's where I keep my medicinal herbs. It's these that need the extra care throughout the year." She named several of the herbs that she had been planting, and Amelia recognized one or two.

"What's that one over there?" Amelia asked pointing to a group of small plants closest to the kitchen walls.

"That is belladonna, sometimes called the Devil's Berries because if used incorrectly it can cause death." Mrs. Dowling bent down and started to pick up her gardening tools that were laying about.

"Really?" Amelia asked in fascination looking at the innocuous little plant growing in the shelter of the garden. What is my cook doing growing a

poisonous plant amongst the other medicinal herbs? she wondered.

"One of nature's great deceivers it is."

Amelia regarded the little cook at her curious choice of words. She didn't think she had ever heard of a plant referred to as a deceiver. "What do you mean?"

"People are always taken in by beauty never expecting it to be false, but more often than not it is, at least in nature. Like with the belladonna. It's beauty is part of what makes it so dangerous. Fragrant flowers and delicious blackberries lure the unsuspecting to sample its delights. Too much, though, causes a painful death." Mrs. Dowling shrugged as if a horribly painful death from belladonna was inconsequential.

Amelia shivered. "Then why do you grow it?"

Mrs. Dowling finished storing her gardening implements and then brushed off her apron. "Because even something as dangerous as belladonna has its uses. As long as you know how to control it." She sprinkled a fresh covering of hay over the new plants for added warmth. "You can't blame the poor plant either, as it's only natural that it has some sort of protection, just like every other living thing does. It's no different than a rose's thorns or a skunk's odor, I imagine."

As Mrs. Dowling spoke about the belladonna, a seed of hope blossomed in Amelia's breast. Jane had said she should break the curse, but Amelia had learned long ago after years of trying that it was impossible to do so. But what if like Mrs. Dowling suggested, she could learn to control it in small doses like the belladonna? In a situation where she needed to protect herself or a loved one, could she restrain her curse enough to defend those she loved most? It was an exciting idea to contemplate.

Wiping her hands of the last of the hay, Mrs. Dowling asked Amelia, "Now, what can I do for you, my lady, since I imagine it wasn't to help me plant or to listen to me talk your ear off about my herbs?"

Tucking away the beginning of an idea in a corner of her mind, Amelia smiled and quickly explained her needs. The two women walked back into the kitchen and after some rapid preparations, she and William were once again on their way to the stables.

"WHAT did you discover about the footprints I found where Amelia saw her ghost?" Tavis asked Wickes while he rubbed down Wickes's tired mount. It had been close to a week since the incident in the garden with Jane, and upon learning of it, Wickes had grown excited and had immediately departed to London to look into something. Because despite Amelia's assertions that Jane was a spirit, both Tavis and Wickes were of the firm belief that Amelia's mysterious specter was of flesh and blood rather than whatever ethereal mist formed the spirits of the dead. Tavis hoped that his friend's trip to London had yielded some useful information about the two pair of footprints he had found leading into and out of the tree grove.

"Not much," Wickes admitted leaning against the stall door. "Before leaving for London, I stopped in the village to talk with any of the locals, see if any strangers had come around these parts asking questions about you or Lady Stanton."

"And?" Tavis slammed the stall door and walked over to a pile of hay that he then threw into the horse's stall.

"And nothing." Wickes sighed deeply. "Whoever was in that tree grove made sure to keep out of town to avoid suspicion. We have no way of knowing who was actually there. For all we know, it could have been two villagers playing a prank on your wife."

"But the information was too specific, Tom," Tavis said raking his hands through his hair. "It has to be someone who knows Amelia and her curse, knows that Amelia is here with me and who is familiar enough with the property to avoid detection while entering and leaving." He leveled a hard glare at Wickes. "You and I know there's only one person who that could be."

"Tavis," Wickes warned. "We don't have enough proof!"

"What further proof do you need?" Tavis shouted. "He lied to us about who he was, and has been working with Westby all this time. Plus," he continued angrily, "he nearly raped my wife! It has to be Meeks!"

Wickes looked like he was about to say something, but then held up his hands in defense. "Granted, Meeks seems like the obvious choice, but what would he gain by sending in an old woman to talk to your wife? From what your wife described nothing untoward happened. If anything, this mysterious Jane person was trying to help Lady Stanton, not harm her, and if what you say is true about Meeks, then wouldn't he have harmed her had he the chance?"

Tavis grudgingly concede that Wickes was most likely right. There was no sign of foul play, and in spite of her initial scare, Amelia seemed relatively unaffected. From what he knew of Meeks, he wouldn't have stopped at scaring Amelia. No, he would have done whatever he could have to finish what he had started all those months ago.

Running his hand tiredly through his hair, Wickes closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. He had ridden all night to get here this

morning, and Tavis knew the fatigue that accompanied that type of journey. It was obvious to him that he would get nothing more from Wickes about his trip to London until after he had rested and eaten.

"Why don't you head up to the house now to change and get something to eat?" Tavis suggested. "We can discuss more later."

Yawning tiredly and nodding his head in agreement, Wickes slapped Tavis on the back and ambled towards the house. Looking out down the path from the stable to the main house, Tavis could just make out the petite figure and flaming hair of his wife followed closely by the taller, broader figure of one of his footmen. He knew that Amelia hated having an escort, but until this mess with her father was cleared up, he didn't want Amelia going anywhere without him or a guard.

Despite her pique at this new arrangement, she had been nothing but good-natured and content this past week. So much so that he wanted to surprise her with a ride in the country and a visit to Stanton to do some shopping. He knew she had been restless being cooped up in the castle constantly shadowed by a footman, so he thought a treat was in order.

"Was that Mr. Wickes I saw you talking to?" Amelia queried as she entered the stables. "I have yet to meet him, Tavis," she scolded gently. "He left so quickly last time that I didn't have a chance to, and on the way back to the house this time he took a different path so I didn't even get a good look at him." She set her basket on a small stool and teased lightly, "If I didn't know better, I'd say he was avoiding me!" Bending over the basket, she busily rifled through the contents. "I thought you might be hungry after a busy morning working with the horses, so I brought us a picnic lunch." She held up a sturdy blanket in triumph. "Aha! I knew it was in there."

Before she could spread it out onto the floor, Tavis grabbed her hand and leaned in for a swift kiss. "How about we take a ride instead?"

AMELIA was in heaven. They had ridden for hours across rolling hills and through dappled meadows, Amelia elated to be free from the confines of the castle. As soon as Tavis had suggested a ride, she had raced to saddle her horse and the two had taken off across the fields towards Stanton. Now they were sitting cozily by a small stream, the horses contentedly grazing nearby and the two of them sharing their cold picnic under a flowering apple tree. It had been a perfect day, or at least until she had brought up traveling to London to see her parents.

"No, Amelia," Tavis stated firmly shaking a chicken leg in her direction. "Absolutely not!" Tavis threw his leg aside and wiped his hands hastily on his lap. "It's too dangerous!"

"But Tavis," Amelia pleaded. "I need to see my parents, and at least try to explain what happened." She scooted closer to where Tavis sat on the blanket. "Besides, once there I can speak to father about my dowry. Those funds will go a long way to helping rebuild Ballywith."

"I don't want you to worry about that, lass," Tavis explained patiently. "And besides, I have a plan for rebuilding Ballywith. We were in it

earlier today."

Amelia scrunched her eyebrows in thought. "What? The stables?"

He smiled easily. "One day Ballywith Stables will be synonymous with the finest horses in all of England and Scotland." Tavis explained to Amelia his plan for rebuilding the stables, his rich baritone taking on his native brogue the more excited he became discussing his plans. Amelia loved the way his eyes sparkled with passion as he spoke of the horses and the faint glimmer of pride she saw when he told her he had already sold the offspring of Majesty and Hyacinth, two horses she knew had until recently been in her father's stables. That is, if a new little miracle would appear within the next eighteen months. Otherwise the buyer was going to take his business, and his deep pockets, to another breeder. Though he didn't say it, Amelia could tell he was worried about possibly losing out on his first commission.

"My father's untimely thievery of your horses must have delayed your timeline." She frowned, not liking that her father's prank could have cost her husband several thousand needed pounds.

Tavis nodded slowly. "Aye, a bit, but I don't want you to worry any. Hyacinth will be in foal before month's end. I have a feeling."

Amelia smiled worriedly at Tavis's optimism, but decided not to further press the issue of her dowry until later. Picking up a biscuit, Amelia nibbled on it while she pondered their serious financial situation. True, Tavis had plans for bringing in much needed money to the estate; however, horse breeding was a slow, tricky business. So many things could go wrong. Amelia had serious misgivings about this venture, but in light of Tavis's enthusiasm she wisely held her tongue. For now.

"Will you breed Legacy's Daughter?"

"Your horse?" Tavis reached for some apple tarts and smeared them with honey. "I hadn't thought of it. You'll want to ride her, won't you? If she's breeding, you won't be able to ride her as much as you might like."

"Well, yes, but she has impeccable lineage." Amelia shrugged indifferently and poured herself a glass of wine. "If using her as a broodmare meant the stables had a better chance at survival, then I would be willing."

"No," Tavis said shaking his head. "Legacy's Daughter is yours." He popped some apple tart into his mouth and said conversationally, "Your horse's dam, Legacy, was actually my horse when I was a boy."

"What?" Amelia stopped her wine glass midway to her mouth and stared at Tavis. "How did my father end up with her foal?"

"From what I can figure, my father must have kept Legacy and her foal for years even though he had told me that they had been sold. He really did hate me. Anything I loved he took from me. My brother, my home with my aunt, my horse." Tavis stopped suddenly and Amelia knew from the flash of pain she had seen cross his face that he must have loved his horse very much. But soon, his usual mask of geniality was back on his face and Amelia

knew not to press further on that subject. Throwing down his napkin, he reached for his wine glass. “Your father obviously picked up Legacy’s Daughter when he took the other horses.”

“So, Legacy’s Daughter is really your horse, then,” Amelia said slowly placing her glass down as an uncomfortable feeling formed in her stomach at the thought of having taken something beloved that had once belonged to her husband.

Tavis drank deeply of his wine glass, draining the contents in one swallow before answering. “As I said before, lass, she’s yours.” She started to protest, but he cut her off by leaning over and kissing her surprised lips. Then he grinned that endearing lopsided smile of his and said, “Consider it a belated wedding gift if you insist.”

Amelia knew there was no use arguing with him so she simply smiled. “Thank you, husband.”

LEANING back on his arms, Tavis was glad to have been able to share with Amelia his plans for the estate. Finally being able to discuss Legacy’s Daughter with her was also a relief. He had never liked that horrible lie he had told her about why he had stolen those horses. Even though she had accepted it, he had felt guilty about concealing things from her. At least this way, he was able to share a part of himself without hiding everything.

Stretching his arms languidly over his head, Tavis debated against taking a quick nap before he began the pleasurable business of seducing his wife. He yawned deeply as the combination of a full stomach and tiredness from a hard morning working with the horses finally caught up to him and decided a nap wouldn’t hurt. That way he’d be refreshed and ready to make love to his wife when the mood struck.

Amelia hummed a song under her breath, its soft melody soothing him into a comfortable state of relaxation. He watched her graceful movements as she packed up the remains of their meal in the basket. Finally moving to Tavis’s side, she rested her head on his chest, and he felt her sigh.

“What is it love?” he asked as he gently stroked her hair.

“I’m just happy. I never dreamed I could be so content, but marriage to you has shown me how much I was missing before. I might have thought myself to be content without love, but I know I was lying to myself because this, what we have together, this is truly happiness.” She nestled more closely to Tavis’s side, wrapping her slender arms around his side.

Tavis’s hand stilled and he propped himself up to better look at his wife. “What did you say?” She smiled a secret, womanly smile, and after a lengthy pause in which he felt as if Amelia were gauging his mood, she tilted her head to the side in a gentle approval of what she saw. “I think you’re ready now to hear it now.”

“To hear what?”

“That I love you,” she said simply, her expression open and sincere.

"That I think I've waited for you my whole life to love, if that makes any sense."

Tavis was dumbfounded. Elated, to be sure that she loved him in return, but amazed that with no indication of his own feelings for her, she was brave enough to admit what she felt. What a precious gift she had given him. What an amazing woman he had found.

He must have looked terrified, or at the very least shocked because she laughed softly and patted his arm. "It's okay, Tavis. You don't have to say it in return. I just wanted you to know how I feel. One day, I hope you could feel the same about me."

Feel the same about her? he thought foggily with the part of his brain that had just been blown away by her declaration, while the remaining part of his mind that still had some sense screamed, *We do! We do love her! Tell her now!* No matter how he tried, the words refused to form to tell her of his own love for her.

Because yes, he loved her, loved her with all of his being. True, he had realized it weeks ago, but it had scared him and made him feel vulnerable as hell. He didn't know if he even wanted to love if he had to feel that exposed, so he had pushed her away from him using distance as a shield to protect himself from such an unknown emotion. As the weeks passed and Amelia and Tavis grew to know each other, he knew he could no longer deny what he truly felt or pass of this notion of love for an overblown case of lust. She had quite simply become his everything. His present and his future. His lover, his wife. His friend and partner. It was as if his long dormant heart had learned to beat the day she ran into him outside her father's stable. And yes, it scared the hell out of him to admit that, but he also knew that as long as Amelia was with him, it would be alright for him to feel vulnerable or scared sometimes.

Though he couldn't give her those words quite yet, he decided to show her how he felt instead. "I need to love you, lass," he rasped in his deep brogue. "I need to feel you around me."

He took her then in the waning afternoon sunlight as the apple blossoms danced and twirled overhead weaving their perfumed fragrance around the two lovers. Wordlessly he buried himself into her tight heat gliding effortlessly back and forth into her welcoming body. How long he loved her, he couldn't say. Time seemed to lose all meaning in the sheltering protection of Amelia's embrace. He could have loved her all night, so intent was he on showing his wife in actions what he couldn't yet say in words, but when her flesh trembled on the verge of release and her passion filled voice cried out, "I love you!" Tavis let go, knowing that after years of searching for his place in the world, he had finally come home.

"FATHER! Mother!" Amelia looked incredulously back and forth at her parents who were comfortably ensconced within her parlor taking tea with Tavis. When a footman had found her where she had been reading in the library in her favorite spot in front of a big, sunny window and informed her that her parents had just arrived, she had not believed him. She had, in fact, called him a liar.

After Tavis had refused to let Amelia make the trip to London to see her parents, he had agreed to send his man of business, Mr. Coombes, to explain to them what happened and to arrange for payment of Amelia's dowry. Mr. Coombes also bore a letter from Amelia, the content of which included an invitation to come and stay at Ballywith, but as Mr. Coombes had left for London but two days ago, there could be no possible explanation for her parent's unexpected arrival. Hence, the footman must be mistaken.

The footman had, however, insisted that indeed, Lord and Lady Westby had recently arrived, and after listening to his description of the travelers' appearance and most especially when he had described how the female of the party had cried on and off since exiting the carriage, she knew it had to be true. Now seeing them on her settee in her parlor drinking from her teacups, the proof was irrefutable. "What are you doing here?" she asked dazedly.

"Is that anyway to greet your parents, Amelia?" sniffed her mother. "After we rushed from home and traveled for days on insufferable roads in a cramped carriage only to arrive in Scotland of all places," she paused to wrinkle her nose and to look in disdain at her surroundings, "and all you have to ask is what we are doing here?"

"Yes," Amelia said dazedly as she sank into a vacant spot next to Tavis. "I just sent you a letter explaining everything, but it hasn't yet reached London. How did you know where to find me?" She lowered her head on the guise of arranging her skirts when really she was trying to steal a quick peek at her father. After overhearing Tavis's conversation with Mr. Wickes, there was still so much that she didn't understand about her father. She searched his face for any sign that he may be hiding something, but all she saw from her brief glance was his usual cool mask of politeness.

Tavis handed her a cup of tea, and she smiled gratefully at him, understanding full well that this situation had to be as uncomfortable for him as it was for her.

Her mother's teacup rattled in its saucer as it hit the side table with more force than necessary. "Your sister Beatrice told me after I spent almost two weeks worrying whether you were alive or dead. So yes, we are here because I needed to see for myself that you were safe and unharmed." Twin spots of color formed high on her mother's cheekbones and Amelia opened her mouth to respond, but her mother was apparently not done yet. Pointing an elegant finger in her daughter's direction, she said in a voice shaking from emotion, "You run away and elope, not even leaving us a note of your whereabouts, only to find out that you've married and are living in Scotland!" Her mother's cheeks bloomed even more with the deep red of irritation as she

glared at her daughter.

Amelia was startled at her mother's show of anger. Not that her mother was angry. No, if there was one thing her mother enjoyed it was playing up her anger or her hurt, so she could manipulate those unfortunate enough to be in her way. What surprised Amelia was that for the first time the emotions she was seeing from her mother were real. Though her eyes sparkled with wetness, there was no overly dramatic crying. The redness on her cheeks was natural and not from the usual harsh pinching inflicted on her cheeks to mimic her pretended outrage. Though she was upset with herself for causing her mother pain, Amelia's heart lightened at the display of emotions her mother was showing on her behalf.

"I'm sorry, mother," Amelia stammered out. "Had I been thinking more clearly, I should have known to leave you a letter."

"Humph!" Lady Westby snorted out crossing her arms over her chest. "It would have been nice to know if you were safe or not, Amelia." Lady Westby speared Tavis with a hostile glare. "And now that I see who you were with, that lying Scots, I wonder at how safe you really have been all this time."

Amelia felt Tavis, who had remained quiet throughout this entire exchange, stir next to her and could guess at his outrage from her mother's statement. "I beg your pardon, madam," Tavis began.

"Now, Anne," Lord Westby said interrupting Tavis and finally breaking his silence. Placing a comforting hand on his wife's arm, he soothed, "You know that this is the match that we had hoped for between Amelia and Lord Stanton. Maybe it didn't happen in the manner in which we had envisioned, however, the outcome is the same. Be happy for them, my dear," he said softly. "It's obvious that the two are deeply in love with each other and have found their own happiness together."

Lady Westby softened at her husband's words and lowered her crossed arms to her side. "A girl shouldn't keep secrets from her mother, Howard. I should have known where she was and what she was doing." Her eyes sparkled brilliantly with unshed tears. "I'm her mother."

"Don't take it too hard, Annie-girl. I imagine they were too overcome with love for each other to think much about anyone else." His eyes when they met Amelia's ordered her to agree.

"Oh, yes, mother," Amelia reassured. "Once I met Tavis I could think of nothing else." She smiled dreamily at her husband who had taken her hand between his own to bestow a tender kiss upon her knuckles.

"I, too, was captivated from the moment I first met your daughter, Lady Westby. I could think of nothing else save her." Though he spoke to her mother, his words were for Amelia alone, and her heart swelled with the love she felt for him and the knowledge that though he hadn't said as much, this man loved her in return.

"You were very naughty, though, Lord Stanton," Lady Westby said

with a trace of her old, sly smile returning to grace her lovely face. “You never once let on that you had already met Amelia when we conversed in the ballroom.”

Tavis answered sheepishly giving Lady Westby a boyish smile, “I did not know who she was, Lady Westby. We met by chance, my lady, out under the stars. At first I didn’t even know if she was a real flesh and blood woman or an otherworldly goddess sent to tempt me with visions of a delightful dream I thought I could never have.” He looked at Amelia with so much love in his eyes that Amelia felt she would burst from this feeling so full it filled her with its light and goodness.

His eyes held hers as he continued weaving his tale to Lady Westby. “We shared an enchanted dance out under the stars, and like the mythical goddess I believed she was, she disappeared once our dance was over. As she left I called out desperately, ‘Who are you, my lady? Please gift me with your name.’ I needed to know what name I should whisper when I begged the gods to return one of their own to Earth for me.” Tavis turned and looked at Lady Westby who was watching the two of them with starry eyes and clasped hands. “I thought she hadn’t heard me, you see, for it was quiet so long after my cry into the darkness,” he explained. “Then I heard it, a faint sound carried on the wings of a warm breeze reached my ears and filled my heart with hope. ‘Lady Amelia Westby,’ it sighed. I tell you I hoped, Lady Westby,” he said seriously, “because I knew her then to be a woman of flesh and not the ethereal dream I knew would always be just out of reach.”

“Why then did you say nothing when we met, Lord Stanton?” Lady Westby asked breathlessly.

“Yes, do explain why Lord Stanton,” Lord Westby asked with a hard, assessing glint in his eyes, “why upon realizing you had met our daughter you would not inform us of this acquaintance?”

Cursing silently in his head, Tavis returned Westby’s hard look with a genial smile of his own. Westby knew Tavis was painting a pretty picture for his wife to lessen the betrayal of Amelia’s elopement, and that there was more to the story than what he was saying. Instead of staying silent and allowing his wife to believe what she would, he insisted on poking holes into his explanation, damn him. Tavis really wanted to hit his father-in-law right now and wondered if that would cause too many problems with his new in-laws. Examining the anger that was ever present when dealing with Lord Westby, he decided it would be best for him, and for his father in-law’s jaw, to address Lady Westby instead of her husband. “I was reeling from meeting your daughter, Lady Westby and felt that using mere words to describe what happened when we met would only tarnish our experience in some way. I wanted to keep it to myself, to keep those memories close to my heart.”

“Now really, Stanton,” Lord Westby started to protest, but his wife interrupted him.

“Shh!” she admonished loudly to her husband. “Let him finish.” Turning back to sweetly smile at Tavis, Lady Westby said, “Go on, Lord Stanton.”

"After leaving the ballroom, I was understandably distraught at having missed our formal introduction, and so I prepared to depart. Imagine my surprise to find Amelia wandering outside looking for me. It was as if Cupid himself blessed our union, so in accord were we at what we should do. I stole her from you, I know, and for that I should apologize." He took a breath and squeezed Amelia's hand tightly in his own. "But I can't because to do so would be to admit that I regretted my actions, which I don't."

Lady Westby drew in a sharp breath and he could see her becoming angry again.

Tavis regarded Amelia's parents steadily and said with all seriousness, "I don't regret taking her, Lady Westby, because running off with your daughter meant that I got to know this incredible woman that much sooner. It meant that I had finally met the person who I knew would be my partner and friend for life." He looked down at Amelia and smiled tenderly into his wife's shining eyes. "It meant that I had finally found the one woman who I would love forever that much sooner."

"You love me?" Amelia whispered disbelievingly, those brilliant green eyes searching his own for proof that he spoke the truth.

"Aye, lass," he said as he placed his forehead gently on her own. "I love you. I think I must have been waiting for you to love my whole life." His softly spoken words, almost the exact words Amelia had used several nights past to describe her feelings for him, spread a feeling of peace throughout his entire being. For a man who always thought love was a weak, unnecessary emotion, he finally understood its power. It centered him and gave him strength, and for the first time in his life, that gaping hole of emptiness created by years of abuse and neglect was filled with all the goodness and joy that Amelia had brought into his life.

"I love you too, Tavis," Amelia said softly. "More than I ever thought possible." He gathered her into his arms and held on tightly. When they separated, he was surprised to find tears streaking down his face. Amelia wiped them away with her fingers and gave a happy, watery laugh when he did the same to her.

Enfolding Amelia into his embrace, he kissed her and once again addressed Amelia's parents. "So you see, my lady I have no regrets, for how can I regret that which has brought me such joy and happiness?"

Lord Westby, who had silently watched this display of affection between his daughter and Tavis, finally spoke. "You love her?" Tavis was seized by the urgency of Westby's question and wondered at the lines of tension that bracketed Westby's mouth and eyes. Westby sat on the edge of the settee as if Tavis's answer were of the utmost importance. Tavis had been under the impression that Lord Westby was an indifferent parent, much like his own was, but this intensity about him regarding his affections for Amelia told a different story. It showed him a father who had strong emotions for his child, and despite their past, Tavis had to grudgingly respect the man's concern for his daughter's welfare.

"With my body and soul, I love her, my lord," Tavis responded

solemnly. Those tight lines of tension on his face eased, and Westby's body visibly sagged. "Then I give you my blessing, Lord Stanton, and wish the two of you well."

Lady Westby's voice wobbled as she said, "It's all well and good for you to give them your blessing, Howard, and for you to regret nothing, Lord Stanton, but I will always regret not being there for Amelia on her special day, even if it was an elopement."

"Oh, mama," Amelia cried rising from her seat to rush over to her mother's embrace. "I wish you could have been there, too." Her mother held on to her tightly and when they pulled away, tears streaked down both women's cheeks. Mother and daughter laughed and embraced again.

Westby rose, as did Tavis. The two stared at each other over the bent heads of their wives and Tavis knew that in spite of Westby's blessing on their elopement, his day of reckoning regarding other matters between the two of them was soon at hand. He nodded his understanding and walked over to his wife. Putting his arm around her and his mother-in-law, he asked, "Perhaps when we are in Town in a month, we could have a wedding celebration at your home? Maybe put some of the gossip surrounding our elopement to rest."

"Could we Tavis?" Amelia asked him with shining eyes full of excitement.

"What a grand idea!" Lady Westby squealed clapping her hands.

Lord Westby joined the little circle and placed a hand on his wife's arm. "Why don't you and Amelia sit down and discuss the celebration." Lady Stanton nodded and he leaned over to press a quick kiss on the top her head. "Tavis," he said jovially, "I'm in need of something a little stronger than tea. What do you say, Stanton?"

"Of course, sir," he replied clapping Westby on the back. "Let me show you what I have in my study." Opening the door for Westby, Tavis ushered him out and led him down the hallway to his private study. Westby entered and wandered around the room looking at the furnishings and the artwork on the walls, before finally settling in a comfortable chair near the fire.

Tavis poured both of them a glass of whiskey and then sank warily into a chair opposite Westby. He raised his glass in salute. "To you and Amelia!" Then he tilted his glass and drained the contents in one swallow. Still, Tavis waited with his glass untouched for the moment when Westby would fly at him in a rage.

Westby must have seen the look of apprehension on his face because he threw back his head and laughed loudly. "I'm not going to kill you, Stanton, no matter that you did break our deal." He clunked his glass down on the table and leaned towards Tavis and waggled a finger in front of his face. "And you stole my horses, too."

Tavis began defensively, "Those horses were mine and you know it!

Besides, I explained to you what happened, Westby, regarding me and Amelia."

"And what a pretty story that was, too!" Westby laughed again. "A mythical goddess my foot. What a storyteller you Scots are!"

Tavis thought back to that night he and Amelia had met and recalled the feeling he had had upon seeing her. "It wasn't all a story. Plus, I thought it would be easier for Lady Westby to accept if I painted a prettier picture than what had actually happened."

Westby sobered. "For that, I thank you. You have no idea what it's been like at home since my wife learned of Amelia's disappearance." He grimaced. "Had you not professed of your love for my daughter so publically before us, I might have had to kill you solely for the pain you caused my wife," he said mildly. "She was understandably distraught, you see." Westby grabbed the bottle that Tavis had brought over and placed on the table in front of the fire. Pouring himself a glass, Westby sat back and suddenly became very serious.

"Westby," Tavis shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I never meant to break our deal. I wasn't lying when I said our elopement just happened."

"No, no," Westby interrupted. "Don't apologize. I wanted you to marry her, and you did. For that you have my undying gratitude. That you took her from the house that much sooner, so much the better."

"What do you mean?" Tavis asked suspiciously.

"She wasn't safe anymore at home," Westby said staring at the swirling amber liquid of his half-empty glass. "I needed her to leave as soon as possible. That's why I used the papers against you." He shrugged, but didn't apologize for the blackmail. "As you so eloquently said, I have no regrets. I would do it again if it meant protecting Amelia."

"Like you protected her when she was almost raped in her own home?" Tavis demanded. At Westby's surprised look, Tavis growled out angrily, "Aye, she told me about that. I have half a mind to beat you to death for failing in your duty as that woman's father." Westby whitened in the face of Tavis's red-hot rage. "You were supposed to protect her, not blame her for what happened!"

Westby straightened and leaned in closer to Tavis. His eyes had taken on a wild look to them that made Tavis more than a little nervous. "But don't you see? That's why I found you."

"To what?" Tavis asked in confusion. "Protect her? Of course I will. With my life. But that doesn't explain why you didn't when she was under your care."

Westby gulped and looked nervously around the room, though only he and Tavis were in it. "I...I couldn't," Westby whispered desperately. "My hands were tied."

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation, and Tavis barked out, “Who is it?’

Wickes peeked his head through the partially open door. “Sorry, Tavis. Didn’t realize you were engaged. I can come back later.” Wickes made to leave, but to Tavis’s surprise, Westby called out, “No, Mr. Wickes, stay please.”

Immediately, Tavis went on guard. He rose and stood looming over Westby. “How do you know who he is?” he demanded. Wickes rapidly closed the door and walked to where a very pale and very nervous Westby still sat. “Yes, Lord Westby, explain how you know who I am.”

Westby’s eyes darted between the two men and wet his lips. Ashen and trembling, Westby said, “I know who you are because I am not working alone. There is someone else, someone you both know who is in charge, not me.”

“Who is he?” Wickes yelled. “Is it Michelson?”

Westby flinched and looked around nervously. His eyes widened in fear, and he shook his head frantically. “No, no I can’t…they’ll kill me!”

Wickes grabbed onto Westby’s lapels and yanked him up. “And I’ll kill you if you don’t, so tell me who he is?”

“It’s..” but whatever Westby was about to say died on his lips as a shot ripped through the window by the fireplace and struck Westby down, silencing him and his confession.

A sharp crack disturbed the peacefulness of the sitting room where Amelia and her mother still sat quietly talking. “What was that?” Amelia gasped looking at her mother in surprise. “Did you hear that noise?”

Her mother shook her head. “It sounded like a gunshot, but that can’t be right. It’s too close to the house. No one would be hunting this closely to the house, would they?”

Amelia’s face blanched. “Oh, no. Tavis!” Rising rapidly, she lifted her skirts and ran out of the room and down the hall to where Tavis and her father had retired to nearly a half an hour previous. “Tavis!” she screamed down the hall. “Tavis!”

A door slammed and Tavis rushed down the rest of the hall to meet Amelia and her mother, who had followed closely behind. “Amelia!” Tavis stopped her from going any further down the hallway. “I need you to take your mother and go down to the kitchen.”

“But Tavis, we heard a gunshot. What happened?”

“Your father’s been shot,” he whispered urgently to her. “It came from outside the window. I don’t know who or why, but he’s been injured. Wickes is tending to him now”

“Howard?” Lady Westby whispered faintly. “Shot?” She wobbled unsteadily and clutched at Amelia’s arm for support. “I need to see him.” Lady Westby tried to walk down the hall, but Tavis stopped her with one strong arm.

“I need to know you are safe, Amelia. Please,” he begged, “go to the kitchen and as soon as I know anything, I will come and find you.” Amelia started to protest, but Tavis stopped her with a hard kiss. “I can’t do my job unless I know you and your mother are protected. Do you understand? Nothing can happen to you.” Amelia heard the note of desperation in his voice and realized how afraid Tavis was. She nodded dully and grabbed on tightly to her mother.

Tavis motioned to two footmen, one of whom was William, who had come into the hall when the shots had been fired. “Take Lady Stanton and Lady Westby down below to the kitchen,” he ordered. Tavis then walked over to a side doorway and returned moments later with two large rifles. Handing one to each of the footmen, he said, “Then return to the kitchen and guard both of these women with your lives. If I find out you let something happen to one of them because you let your guard down, I will kill you myself with my bare hands. Do I make myself clear?” Though pale and trembling, both nodded and hurriedly ushered Amelia and Lady Westby down the hallway to the lower level where the kitchens were.

“What’s this?” bellowed an irritated Mrs. Dowling upon seeing Amelia and her mother enter the kitchen escorted by two armed guards. “I haven’t time for any nonsense right now, what with unexpected guests and the evening meal ready to be cooked!” She shooed at the two footmen and

planted her floured hands on her ample hips. “My lady, I can’t have this much disruption in my kitchen. I did explain to you last time about announcing your visits, didn’t I? I can’t have you popping in whenever you want, no matter if you are the lady of this house.

Amelia led her mother over to a small table in the back corner of the room. Seating Lady Anne at the table, she took the shawl from around her shoulders to wrap around the shaking ones of her stunned mother. Then walking over to where Mrs. Dowling still stood angrily tapping her foot, she leaned over and whispered, “There’s been an accident, and my father’s been shot.” Amelia quickly recounted the events to her cook as best she knew them from what little Tavis had told her. “Which is why his Lordship wishes us to remain below in the kitchens,” Amelia concluded.

When done narrating her tale, Mrs. Dowling wiped off her hands on her apron and started barking commands like a seasoned military officer. Soon the kitchen was a flurry with activities as everyone began working, and Amelia dazedly watched the hurried actions as she sank next to where her mother was already sitting.

Mrs. Dowling waddled over to a shelf next to Amelia and pulled off a small leather sack and a pair of small, pointed scissors. Amelia could hear her cook muttering under her breath about her herbs. “Yarrow to stop the bleeding. Garlic, I think for infection. Not much remains….hmmm….maybe ginger?”

Realizing that cook was going to find some herbs to help her father, she asked anxiously, “Do you know of something to help my father?”

The cook’s face turned thoughtful. “I may have one or two herbs that could help stop the bleeding and ease some of the pain he must be in, that’s of course if the bullet didn’t already do its job.” She smiled worriedly and patted Amelia gently on the shoulder before taking her bag and her scissors down the hall to where her garden lay.

“Wait!” Amelia called jumping up to follow the retreating form of Mrs. Dowling. “Let me help you,” Amelia said breathlessly as she ran down the small hallway after the cook. By the time she reached the door, Mrs. Dowling was already outside, and Amelia had her hand on the door ready to follow.

“My lady!” called William and the other footman stopping her from her hasty exit. “His lordship was very clear that you were to remain in the kitchen under our protection.”

“William,” she pleaded looking at her protector. No longer young, she mused. It was funny how the moment Tavis had placed a gun in his hand, William’s face had suddenly matured from the sunny, smiling countenance of a carefree young man to the harsher, more serious mien of this man before her. “If I stay in here, I’ll go crazy with worry. Please,” she asked softly, “allow me do something useful instead of waiting and worrying.”

It seemed like forever waiting for William to contemplate her request, but before too long, he nodded resignedly. “Fine,” he said blowing out a

breath on a sigh. “But Luke and I go with you, my lady.”

She squeezed his arm gently. “Thank you.”

William wasn’t through giving his orders. “And if something doesn’t feel right to either me or Luke, you will immediately go back inside with no questions asked.”

“Yes, yes,” Amelia said impatiently.

William shook his head and pinned Amelia with a very stern look. “No, my lady. This can’t be like last time when I told you to stay close and you ‘yes,yes’d’ me. Remember that time? You slipped away, and I caught hell from his lordship for having lost you, pardon my language. I had to muck out the stables.” He stared at Amelia until she flinched and looked away.

“I said I was sorry,” she mumbled remembering her guilt when she had discovered how William had had to pay for her act of rebellion.

“I know you did,” William replied easily, “but this is serious, and if something were to happen to you because you wouldn’t listen, I can guarantee you that his lordship will not accept my apology as nicely as I accepted yours.”

Amelia thought about what William said and realized he was right. This was serious. Her father had been shot in her own home, and even though Tavis had yet to tell her what danger still existed, she knew it had something to do with what happened to her father. Amelia shivered and hoped that William was just being overly cautious and that no more danger lurked outside.

“Will you do as we say, my lady? Will you listen and go inside if there is any danger?”

Amelia nodded and finally met William’s eyes. “I promise, William, to do as you say.”

“Alright, then. Let’s proceed.”

Had it not been so serious a situation, it might have been comical the way the three of them walked out to the garden around the side of the house. With William in the lead, Amelia was immediately behind his tall frame, almost nose to shoulder blades with his back. Then Luke sidled up behind her as closely as possible to protect her from the rear. The three were so close together that they had to synchronize their steps when they walked or else fear falling down.

When they rounded the corner to the sheltered garden where Mrs. Dowling kept her special plants, Amelia couldn’t immediately see her cook. Peering out from behind William’s back, she searched for Mrs. Dowling’s robust figure amongst the darkening shadows. All she could see, though, was what looked like a large, misshapen sack lying on the ground. But when that sack moved, Amelia gasped and broke away from her escort to run to the heap.

"Mrs. Dowling!" Amelia yelled shaking the lifeless form of her cook. "Can you hear me? Mrs. Dowling?" Amelia pressed her ear to the cook's chest and was reassured to hear the familiar thumping of a heart beat. It was slow but regular, and Amelia took comfort that Mrs. Dowling was alive.

"Amelia!" William shouted. "Get back to the house now!"

Her head snapped up and looked to where William and Luke had been standing moments earlier. Instead of the two men she expected to see, she saw four, and it took her a moment to realize that they were fighting a fierce battle. Though the footmen appeared to be outmatched, they were not giving up quite so easily. Using their size and strength against the other much more skilled fighters, William and Luke were at least able to prevent the two men from reaching her.

Amelia's eyes widened in terror as one of the unknown men knocked Luke over the head with the butt of his own rifle. William braced up the injured Luke and caught Amelia's eyes amidst the chaos of the fight, and shouted, "Run!"

Giving one last look to the unconscious cook, Amelia hiked up her skirts and ran towards the small opening between the two walls. While the bulk of the fighting blocked the majority of the exit, Luke and William's positioning had created a small opening behind them for her to slip through safely. Ducking her head, she sprinted through the opening and ran quickly back to the house. Her hand was reaching for the doorknob when rough fingers grabbed her from behind and her world went suddenly black.

ONCE assured of Amelia's safety, Tavis grabbed his rifle and swiftly ran out to check the perimeter of the grounds. Judging from the angle and height of the bullet entry, the shooter had been within several hundred yards of the house somewhere up high. Tavis found the window that the bullet went through and ran away from the house to a sparsely wooded area bordering the western edge of his property. He only had to walk fifteen feet or so before he found where the shooter must have stood. It was a small hill with a flat top. At one end lay a large log that someone had to have moved from elsewhere as there were only small saplings surrounding the flat surface. The shooter, Tavis assumed, must have moved it so he could steady the barrel of his rifle. On closer inspection, Tavis noted faint scorch marks on top of the log that confirmed his suspicions.

Looking more closely at the ground, Tavis could see the light indentation of large footprints slightly smaller than his own. Further back on the hill, though, were another set of footprints. The markings of these shoes were easy to see, as the indentation was heavily made into the soil. Someone who weighed at least fifteen stones must have made those footprints, Tavis mused, while the first set of footprints were made by a much leaner man. He finished examining the hill for further evidence of the unknown assailant but found nothing further. Satisfied for the moment, he jogged back to the house.

Mounting the stairs two at a time, Tavis found the room where Wickes had taken Lord Westby after he was shot. "Is he going to live?" Tavis asked Wickes who was stitching up an unconscious Westby.

Wickes grunted. “He’s lucky. The bullet passed right through his shoulder. I was able to staunch the bleeding before stitching it up.” Wickes finished tying off the bandage and walked over to the wash basin where he washed the blood off of his hands. “Of course it could still become infected,” he said seriously. “I’m reluctant to fetch a doctor until we know more about this situation, but if we don’t, he could take a fever during the night. Either way, it’s not an ideal situation.”

“Amelia mentioned that our cook is fairly knowledgeable about herbs and such. Maybe she’ll have something to ward off infection.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to ask,” Wickes said. “But first, tell me what you found.”

Tavis recounted his observations and told Wickes some of his suspicions regarding what he saw.

“Are you sure it was two people?’

“Quite sure. Not only were the prints of different sizes, there was the obvious weight difference.”

“Westby said ‘they’ll kill me,” Wickes muttered to himself. “Do you remember?” he asked turning from the basin to where Tavis stood right inside the door with his feet spread wide and his arms crossed.

“Yes,” Tavis said thoughtfully. “When you asked him to tell us who he is, he said they, not he. I thought Meeks and Westby were partners, but that can’t be right given what happened to Westby. The question becomes who is Meeks working for if not Westby?”

“You definitely think that Meeks is the shooter?” Wickes asked as he began to pace restlessly in front of the bed in which Westby lay unconscious.

“I would say so. That would account for the lighter impressions I found on the ground where the shot came from.”

“Meeks is a good shot, isn’t he?”

“One of the best I’ve seen,” Tavis replied without hesitation having personally witnessed many times Meeks’s skills with a gun on the Continent. “At least that tells us who shot at Westby, but that still doesn’t explain the other man or why they would want to silence Westby in the first place.”

“Amelia,” came a faintly whispered voice.

Both men whipped their heads around and looked at the bed where Westby lay. Walking swiftly over to his side, Tavis now saw that Westby had regained consciousness. Though his eyes were barely cracked, his breathing had noticeably changed and was more rapid and shallow, a sure sign that he was awakening and in pain.

“What did you say?” demanded Tavis. “How does Amelia have anything to do with this?”

It was silent so long that Tavis thought that perhaps Westby had passed into unconsciousness again. Finally, though it must have pained him to do so, Westby haltingly replied, "He…wants her. Broke our deal, though. No Amelia, no deal."

Wickes eyed Tavis speculatively before leaning over the prostrate form of Westby and asked urgently, "Who wants her? Meeks?"

Westby nodded slightly. "Jeremy is…obsessed," Westby managed to get out between shallow gasps. "Couldn't give her to him...couldn't do that to…to my girl."

If what Westby was saying was true, then Jeremy had made a deal with Amelia's father that involved Amelia marrying Meeks in exchange for…? That was the part that remained unclear.

"What was the arrangement you had made with him?" Tavis asked angrily, disliking Westby all the more for using his daughter in whatever illegal activities he was involved in. "What were you going to get for marrying Amelia off to him?"

"Their…silence," he wheezed. "And protection for my…my family."

Tavis's eyes narrowed at Westby's reference once again to there being more than one other person involved in this mess. "Who is Meeks working with?" Tavis all but shouted. Noticing that Westby's eyes had closed once more, Tavis leaned over and shook him on his uninjured shoulder hoping to rouse him enough to get the answers he and Wickes needed. "Damn it, Westby! Who is the other man?"

His head tossed restlessly on the pillow, yet Tavis would not relent. Grabbing the older man by the edges of his tattered and bloody shirt, Tavis yanked him up and shook. "Tell me who he is!"

"Tavis!" Wickes's sharp voice cracked through the still room as he placed his hands on Tavis's upper arm to prevent any further assaults to the injured man. "Enough! We'll never get anything from him if you kill him before he can talk!"

Westby moaned loudly, his head slumping forward onto his chest. He began to mumble incoherently, "Hurry...hurry. Horses. Horse. Hurry. Jeremy. The horses."

"What are you saying?" Tavis commanded. "You're not making any sense!" Tavis shook the man again, but when he only repeated the same phrases, Tavis dropped him back on the bed in disgust. "We'll get nothing more from him now anyway."

Wickes gave Tavis a disapproving look and pushed past him so he could examine the older man, who lay pale and unconscious once more. Leaning over, he checked the older man's pulse and swiftly assessed the bandage for new blood. "Fortunately, he's still alive. Luckily you didn't reopen the wound despite how hard you tried." He straightened and walked to the door to motion in the maid who had been waiting outside. "But I think we

had best seek out the cook just in case."

Running a trembling hand through his hair, he grimaced shakily. "You're right. I'm sorry," Tavis gruffly apologized. Catching sight of the maid who had taken up her position by the side of Westby's bed, Tavis groaned as he recognized the she-devil Margaret. Realizing that now more than ever he needed to be discrete, Tavis wisely held his tongue, though there was plenty more he wanted to say about his father-in-law's cowardice and treachery. No one besides the two of them knew about Westby's illegal activities, and until they could find out who Meeks was working with, today's events needed to be seen as some sort of freak accident, which meant that if he didn't want anything getting back to his wife via Margaret he needed to remain silent.

As Wickes finished giving instruction to the grim-faced Margaret who agreed to watch over Westby, Tavis worked out a story to tell Amelia and her mother. He had finally decided on telling Amelia that it was a hunter who had come too close to the estate when he saw that Wickes had finished talking to Margaret. Surprisingly as they left the room, the ever disapproving Margaret said nothing to him, but the glare she shot him spoke more than her words ever could. He nodded once curtly, and the two men hastily left the room to find the cook.

Eager to see Amelia and offer what comfort he could, Tavis wasted no time in descending the stairs to the kitchen. At first, he could see nothing. Thick smoke poured from the great fire place and obscured his view. Waving his hands in front of him, he shouldered his way through the haze to the doorway in the back hall. Flinging it open, the smoke poured out and finally started to dissipate allowing Tavis to see what had previously been concealed. Several maids rushed back and forth carrying buckets of water to douse the flames at the fire place. One maid carried clean cloths over to the battered and bruised figure of his cook Mrs. Dowling, while another patiently wrapped bandages around his injured cook's arms. Frantically, he searched for Amelia's familiar red-head amidst the two footmen he had sent to protect her, but he only saw the bloody and beaten faces of William and Luke standing guard over his mother-in-law.

Lady Anne was pale, deathly so. She held herself around the middle clutching what looked to be Amelia's shawl tightly around her as she rocked slowly back and forth in her chair. He looked frantically at his two footmen for some sort of explanation, but they turned their heads away, refusing to meet his eyes. An overpowering feeling of dread settled in the pit of his stomach as he regarded the broken figure of Amelia's mother. Bending down, Tavis gently grabbed one of her hands and asked hoarsely, "Amelia?"

"They've taken her," she replied in a low broken voice. "Amelia is gone." Then burying her face in her hands, her body shook as the tears she had so bravely fought against finally burst through.

"TIE her up," a gruff voice said. "Make sure it's tight, too. I don't want her escaping." Heavy footsteps retreated into the distance and as Amelia slowly regained consciousness, she heard the far-off sound of a door opening and then closing. In spite her groggy state, she felt the rough scrape of rope against her skin on her wrists. Someone with blunt fingers roughly had yanked her arms and tied them behind her back and then moved lower to bind her legs together at the ankles. She blinked owlishly to get a better look of her surroundings and experienced a moment of true alarm when all she could see was darkness. It wasn't until she felt a soft weight on her face that she figured out she had some sort of dark cloth over her face.

Where am I? Amelia thought anxiously. *And who took me?* A rising feeling of panic threatened to engulf her, but ruthlessly, she tamped it down. Becoming hysterical would solve nothing. She needed to be calm and rational if she wanted to survive.

Since sight temporarily eluded her, Amelia strained to catch any noise, no matter how faint. It took her several minutes of intense concentration, but she identified the muted footsteps of at least one other person besides the one who was tying her up. And what was that sound? Amelia listened more closely and heard a muffled roar breaking over and over again. Realizing that she must be hearing the surf washing up on shore, Amelia deducted she was near the coast. Sniffing tentatively, her conclusion was confirmed by the briny smell of salt water she detected on the air.

What had Tavis told me? Amelia tried to focus to remember what Tavis had said about Ballywith's location to the Atlantic Ocean. She thought he had said it was a half day's ride to the west, so assuming she had only been unconscious for several hours and not days, that's where they must be.

Her captor having finished tying his final knot, must have stood because she felt a large presence near her right shoulder. When he yanked off the covering from her face, she craned her neck wildly to where her captor stood. Blinking rapidly to accustom her eyes to the sudden lights that illuminated the small space she was in, it took her but moment to recognize the familiar countenance of Jeremy Michelson.

"Jeremy!"she gasped angrily. "It was you?"

"You didn't think I'd let that bastard Scot get away with taking what's mine, did you?" he asked smoothly. "After all, your father promised you to me."

Amelia struggled in vain against her bindings. "He did no such thing, Jeremy. Besides, I told you I would rather die than marry you."

Rough fingers grabbed her by the chin and forced her to look into the cold, calculating eyes of Jeremy. "He did promise, Amelia, and I mean to make him keep his word."

Angrily, she jerked to free her chin from his fingers, but Jeremy held tight bruising the delicate flesh of her face. "You lie!" she spat. "What reason

could he possibly have for such an agreement?"

Releasing Amelia's face, he placed his own fingers on his chin in pretended contemplation. "Hmmm, perhaps it's that your father is a traitor and has been selling Crown secrets to the French since the beginning of the war." He chuckled humorlessly at Amelia's outraged expression. "We promised to keep his secret as long as you were given to me." Placing one hand on the back of Amelia's chair, Jeremy leaned over until his face was mere inches from Amelia's. "Didn't you ever wonder why I was invited to live at your home? Why your father didn't ask me to leave after our little misunderstanding?" he asked casually referencing the time he almost raped her.

"That's not t-true," she stammered but with less conviction than she had felt before. "My father is a good man. He would never betray his country."

This time Jeremy laughed long and hard. "Oh, but he did, Amelia. Willingly and repeatedly. He had his chance to do the honorable thing years ago, but your father was too eager to reap the rewards of our...venture."

"You must have tricked him, then," Amelia said desperately, unable to reconcile the man who had raised her with this portrait of a cold-hearted criminal that Jeremy was painting for her.

"It's time to grow up," Jeremy grit out harshly as he stalked over to a small window to Amelia's right. "Your father is nothing more than a common criminal who knew exactly what he was getting into when he signed up."

Tears welled in her eyes as she mutely shook her head in disbelief. How could he have lied to her family for all of these years? She closed her eyes and willed herself not to cry, refusing to give Jeremy the satisfaction of seeing how much his words had hurt her. Breathing in deeply, she counted her breaths to still her rapidly beating heart. For several moments, she remained silent as she cleared her cluttered mind when suddenly a whispered voice echoed in her mind, startling her out of her misery. *Then why did your father break his deal? Find out what happened, Amelia! Do not give up hope!*

"I don't understand," she murmured to herself. "If I was supposed to marry you, why did my father seek out someone else for me?"

His handsome face distorted into a disgusted sneer at Amelia's whispered question. "Because your father grew a conscience in his old age. Said he could no longer stomach getting rich off of the blood of fallen English soldiers." Jeremy's sneer deepened. "We were willing to let him leave our organization so long as I became a part of his family. You, Amelia, were his collateral, his promise to us that he would remain silent."

Returning to Amelia's side, Jeremy wrapped his fingers around her throat where he applied gentle pressure. Amelia shuddered at the soulless look he gave her as he watched his own fingers where they lay on her pale skin. His voice was deceptively mild while he patiently explained, "As long as he remained silent, you would be safe. The minute he revealed our secret was the moment you died." Amelia gasped and struggled for breath when the fingers

that encircled her throat suddenly started to squeeze harder. “But when he secured you the hand of that bastard Tavis McGuire, he sealed his death.”

“Jeremy,” she gasped out desperately. “I...can’t...breath.” An unholy light had entered his eyes, almost as if he enjoyed causing her physical pain. She thought for sure he would choke her to death. Her vision blackened at the edges and just when she felt herself slip into unconsciousness, he abruptly let her go. Blessed air rushed back into her lungs making Amelia cough and splutter. She pulled in deep breaths of air, her mind fuzzily trying to piece together what Jeremy had just revealed. If what he said was true, then her father had had misgivings about his role as traitor. He also must have decided that she was more important to him than saving his own skin, which is why he arranged an acquaintance between her and Tavis. That one selfless act instilled within her a small kernel of hope, a reason to continue fighting. But she needed to be calm, and she needed to stall until she could figure a way out of this mess.

“Unfortunately, because of your husband and the stalwart Mr. Wickes, I did not have a clean shot on your father and was not able to kill him.” He sighed deeply. “Which means that I will have to postpone killing you until after I track down your father.” Trailing one smooth finger down the side of Amelia’s face, he said, “Or I could make him watch as I kill you and then end his life. That has a ring of justice about it.” Taking her bottom lip between his thumb and forefinger, he pulled hard causing Amelia to wince. “And then your husband could watch, too, as I take your life before his very eyes.”

Oh, God, no! Amelia couldn’t allow Jeremy to go back to Ballywith. Not when her mother and her husband were still there, and her father, even though he was a lying traitor. Jeremy was just crazy enough to kill them all. She had to protect them, but how? *Lie*, came that same whispered voice from before. *Tell him a lie.*

Lie? Amelia thought frantically. She had not had the chance to practice lying since her discussion that day in the garden with Mrs. Dowling. What had Mrs. Dowling said about belladonna? Every plant and animal has a way to protect itself. Why not her? Couldn’t she tell a lie to protect those she loved?

Wetting her lips, Amelia croaked out past the pain and swelling in her throat, “He’s dead.”

“What’s that?” Jeremy asked from where he stood again by the window.

Not feeling any dizziness or pains in her stomach that usually accompanied a lie, she swallowed and tried again, louder this time. “I said he’s dead. You killed him.”

Striding rapidly towards her, he boxed her in with his arms. “That’s impossible,” he said angrily, his nostrils flaring with each agitated breath he took. “I am an excellent marksman, and I know when I’ve made a kill shot. That was not one.”

Firming her jaw, she flashed her eyes at him in anger. “Believe me when I say that you killed him.” She swallowed again viciously pushing past the rising bile from her churning stomach. “I saw the blood pour out of him and heard his last shuddering breath. He’s dead.” Biting her lip, she breathed in steadily to relax her clenching stomach. Soon the beads of perspiration that had broken out on her forehead had disappeared, and Amelia unwaveringly stared down Jeremy. As the silence lengthened and Jeremy did not break eye contact with Amelia, she finally concluded, *He is waiting to see if I’ll become ill from a lie.*

“You know I cannot tell a lie, Jeremy,” she said firmly refusing to back down.

Thankfully, he believed her, for he backed away and allowed Amelia to take in a deep, steadying breath.

“Well,” Jeremy finally said, “that saves me the trip back to Stanton to finish him off, and it allows us more time to wed before we depart for France.”

“Wed?” she asked dubiously. “I am a married woman, Jeremy, or have you forgotten?”

“So little you know, Amelia. You may be legally wed here in Scotland,” he practically spat out the word Scotland, “but in England you are not. We will marry by a special license and then sail for France.” He grinned maliciously at Amelia. “Where I will finally bed you and then kill you.”

The sound of the door opening signaled the return of the unknown man who had ordered her to be restrained. Once again, his heavy gait pounded on the wooden slats of the floor coming ever nearer to where she sat trembling in fear. At least with Jeremy she knew where she stood--he would keep her alive long enough to marry her and rape her. Though frightening, it allowed her enough time to figure out how to escape. This stranger with the heavy steps and the raspy voice, he was unknown and it was that element which scared Amelia most. For how could she protect herself against what she did not know?

“Change of plans. I found a priest who’ll do the service here at dawn,” he said, his rough voice coming from behind Amelia and sending prickles of dread along her skin.

“Will it be legal?” Jeremy questioned. “I want her to be mine when she dies, so McGuire knows it was I who took away what he loves the most.”

“It’ll be legal. I found someone to forge a special license for me.”

“In this backwater?” Jeremy asked incredulously.

“Any job can be done for a price, son. All you have to do is ask.”

Son? Amelia thought wildly a dreadful suspicion starting to form in her mind. Loud footsteps slowly approached, and Amelia swung her head violently to see who the other man was.

"Time to cover her, Jeremy," he ordered. Amelia could just make out his profile from the corner of her eye. He was a large, beefy man with a bald head and a bulbous nose, yet she still could not make out the entirety of his features or recognize him from what little she could see. "I want her silent until dawn." The man moved in front of Amelia with a black sac in his hands, and Amelia got her first good look at him, from the top of his shiny head to the familiar red, puckered scar running the length of his right cheek.

"You!" she gasped as the man swiftly covered her face with the funny smelling bag that made her so very tired, plunging her once again into darkness. She felt the cords tighten around her neck sealing in the dizzying fumes of the bag. Right before she blacked out she wondered fuzzily what Jeremy's father was doing alive and in Scotland when he was supposed to be dead at the bottom of the sea?

"WAIT!" a feeble voice cried from the top of the stairs. Tavis turned abruptly and spied the ashen, pained face of Lord Westby. The maid Margaret had her plump arms around the man's waist to support him should his legs happen to give out on him. "I'm coming with you."

"The hell you are!" Tavis swore fiercely. "You're no good to me in the condition you are in. I'll make better time on my own."

Westby started to make his way slowly down the stairs, each step an obvious effort. His wife, Lady Anne, immediately sped to his side, wrapping one of her own arms about his waist. "You don't know where to look for her or even who has her."

Grabbing his pack bag and slinging it over his shoulder, he glared at Westby. "I know they headed west. I'm going to ride that way until I find them, and when I do," his eyes narrowed to small, furious slits, "I'll cut their throats open and watch them die." Turning swiftly on his heels, Tavis headed for the door with Wickes close behind him.

"I know who has her and where they took her!" Westby's desperate voice penetrated the thick fog of anger that had engulfed Tavis the moment he realized his wife had been taken. Stalking rapidly back to where Westby clutched at the railing at the bottom of the steps, he demanded, "Where is my wife, Westby, and who took her?"

"You already know Jeremy was one of the men. The other," Westby gulped and if possible, his already ashen face went even greyer, "is his father, Henry Michelson, or Harry the Horse, as he is sometimes called."

Tavis stepped back from Westby and looked at Wickes, who had joined Tavis by this point, in confusion. "That's impossible. He was drowned at sea."

Wickes stared at Westby with a speculative gleam in his hawk eyes. "Tom, you're not surprised by this? You knew?" Tavis asked in genuine surprise.

Without removing his eyes from the pasty, sweaty face of Westby, he replied, "With his lucrative shipping firm and his contacts across Europe, we

had long suspected Henry Michelson of selling Crown secrets. When news came of his unfortunate death at sea, there were many who believed that he had faked his own death, to let the suspicions die with him, but we never had any proof." Wickes crossed his arms across his chest and ordered, "What do you know? Tell me everything"

"No," Tavis cut in to Wickes interrogation. "You can question him later. Right now, I need to find Amelia. Where did they take her? What are their plans for her?"

"There is a village by the name of Oban on the bay of the Atlantic some four hours west of here. It used to be nothing more than a few run down cottages with poor fisherman trying to eke out a living, but about twenty years back, a distillery was opened. Henry, ever the opportunist, started running ships out of the bay there carrying loads of whiskey to England and beyond. At the time, he had bought one of the cottages right on the bay to better watch his investments. That's where he'll have taken her before he sets sail again for France."

"To what purpose?" Tavis asked, though he feared he already knew the answer.

"As I said, Jeremy is obsessed with having Amelia, and he was most angry that she had run off with you. He will want to wed her. Then he...he'll rape her," Westby gulped and Lady Anne gasped, shaking her head as tears filled her eyes. "And then," Westby continued, his voice no more than a harsh whisper, "he'll kill her."

Tavis closed his eyes on a silent prayer for his kidnapped wife, and then without a word more to anyone he turned and walked out the door.

Chapter 22

IT had taken them several hours of hard riding, but Tavis and Wickes finally arrived in Oban. Though faint streaks of pale blue streaked the sky behind them signaling the dawn of a new day, all of Oban to the west lay in darkness before them. Finding Henry's cottage had been fairly easy, the town was still so small that not many cottages dotted the shoreline. They had tied their horses to some trees fifty yards or so from the cottage and had snuck up to the western side of the building nearest the water.

There was a faint light coming through one of the windows, and Tavis cautiously poked his head up to peer through it. What he saw instantly relieved him, for tied to a chair in the middle of the room was Amelia. Although a black cloth covered her head, which initially caused him to panic that they had arrived too late, he could make out the slight rise and fall of her chest indicating that she still lived.

Silently beckoning to Wickes, he managed to tell him through hand motions that Amelia was within and alive. While he hadn't seen anyone in the room with Amelia, he didn't want to risk endangering her further by attempting to rescue her now in case there was someone inside that he couldn't see. The two men worked out a plan, and Wickes crept off to take his position on higher ground. Tavis was prepared to move away from the window when he heard movement from inside the cottage.

"It's time to wake up, my beloved," Jeremy's unmistakable voice clearly traveled through the open window to where Tavis lurked below.

"Wha-? Waz goin on?" Amelia asked foggily.

Had she been drugged? Tavis wondered after hearing Amelia's slurred voice.

"Dawn is upon us, and soon we shall be wed."

"I don wanna marry you," she slurred. "Jes kill me now."

"Now, now, my dear," Jeremy soothed, "is that anyway to talk to your bridegroom?"

"Get your hands off of my, Jeremy!" Amelia yelled clearly, the fog of whatever drug had affected her having finally worn off. Tavis tensed, his hand poised over his gun ready to fire if need be.

"Just a little preview of our wedding night, Amelia," Jeremy laughed.

"I'd rather die," she spit out.

"Oh, you will."

"Now?" she pleaded.

"And ruin my fun? I'll kill you my dear, but only when your husband has arrived. I want him to watch me do it." A dark tone crept into Jeremy's

voice. “Might even make him watch as I spread your legs apart and plunge my cock inside of you. Now won’t that be fun, hmmm?”

Tavis ground his teeth together in absolute fury, but as long as Jeremy was in there with Amelia, he needed to stick to the plan.

“He won’t come,” Amelia said morosely.

“Of course he’ll come,” Jeremy replied confidently. “I know him. He loves you, so he’ll have to come to save you.”

“He doesn’t love me.” Tavis’s jaw dropped at Amelia’s blatant lie. She knew that he loved her, had in fact told her that he loved her yesterday in front of her parents. Why would she say something so untrue? Could she honestly believe it? He waited to see what more she would say.

“What do you mean?” Jeremy asked coldly. “I thought the reason you ran off with him in the first place was that it was love at first sight.”

Amelia snorted. “He may have told me that, but really he wanted his horses that my father had taken from him. I just happened to come along and spoil his plans.”

What is going on? Tavis wondered desperately. She was still conscious, so she couldn’t be lying otherwise she would have fainted. Had she somehow found out what he had really been doing at the ball when they had first met?

“So if you are planning on taking revenge against my husband by killing me, Jeremy, you are wasting your time. I tell you, he will not come. Even if he did, he would not care.”

There were several long minutes of silence in which Tavis could hear rapid pacing across the floorboards. “Regardless,” Jeremy eventually said, “with or without McGuire present we will proceed as originally planned.” He heard Jeremy’s footsteps walk further away, and then a door slammed leaving the room once again silent.

“Tavis,” Amelia’s softly whispered voice came to him through the window. “Please hurry and find me.”

Tavis didn’t know what to think. First she says he doesn’t love her and won’t come for her, and now she is wishing that he would. Had she been lying before? But if so, why hadn’t she become ill?

Peering through the window once more, Tavis hoisted himself over the ledge into the room. Walking quietly to where his wife sat, he placed his hand over her mouth and in a low voice cautioned her to be quiet. “Shh, wife. It’s me.”

She struggled then, against her bonds and twisted her head to stare in burning hope at her husband’ familiar face. Swiftly, he released her bonds about her wrists and then at her legs. When she was free, she launched herself into her husband’s arms. “Oh, Tavis!” she sobbed softly into his chest. “I

knew you'd find me! I knew it!"

He held her to him and breathed deeply of her familiar scent, taking comfort in her words and in the feel of her body warm and alive in his arms. "Then why did you say otherwise? Why did you lie?"

Amelia sniffled and wiped at her eyes. "I knew that Jeremy was obsessed with taking his revenge in front of you, and I thought to buy myself some time if he thought you didn't care about me. Maybe if he thought you weren't coming he would keep me alive for a little bit longer, at least until you could find me."

"You lied?" Tavis asked skeptically. "How is that possible?"

"I broke my curse, Tavis. On my own." she whispered proudly, her face practically beaming at her accomplishment. "I discovered that if I have to lie, I can do so to protect myself or those that I love."

"You broke your curse?" Tavis leaned in to swiftly kiss his wife on the lips. "You're amazing! I love you so much, Amelia," he said fiercely.

"I love you, too, Tavis."

"We need to get out of here," he said quickly changing the subject. "Is there another way out besides that door?" he asked scanning the room for another exit.

"Why can't we leave through the window you came in through?"

"I barely made it through myself, and I have much skinnier hips than you do." He tapped her nose with his finger and shook his head dismissively. "No, we can't go out that way."

"What about…" but her words died in her throat at the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Quick! Hide Tavis! He can't find you here!"

"Sit in the chair and pretend to still be tied. I'll take care of the rest!" Tavis hid behind a tall bureau in the corner of the room, the shadows helping to conceal his tall frame. Amelia did as she was told and resumed her position in the chair with her arms behind her back and her ankles crossed. Lowering her head so he wouldn't immediately see the excited fervor in her eyes, she waited.

"The priest has been delayed. Father has gone to look for him," Jeremy announced, "so I decided why wait until after we're married to get on with it?"

Amelia watched with mounting horror as Jeremy started to unbutton the flap at his breeches. "I want to enjoy you more than once before I have to kill you." He reached into his breeches, then stopped, laughing with good humor. "How foolish of me. You're still tied. Can't spread those plump thighs if you're strapped to the chair." Bending over to release her ankles, Amelia

instantly reacted. Raising her leg in a sharp upward motion, she slammed her knee into Jeremy's nose. A satisfying crunch echoed throughout the room.

"You bitch!" he screamed holding onto his nose as blood streamed down his face. "You broke my nose!"

Standing up, Amelia walked calmly to where Jeremy continued to writhe and moan in pain. She grasped his shoulders and firmly thrust her knee into his groin. He screamed loudly and fell to the floor double over in pain. "That's for trying to rape me, you bastard!" She reared her leg back to kick him in the stomach when strong arms encircled her waist pulling her trembling frame back into the solid strength of her husband. Turning her easily, Tavis cradled her head on his chest. One arm stayed firmly around her waist while the other held a cocked pistol aimed directly at the pitiful form of Jeremy Michelson.

"That's enough, lass," Tavis's whispered voice said in her ear. "You defended yourself well, but that's enough. It's not in you to be violent, love. He's not worth it, Amelia. Let go of that anger." He continued whispering soothing words into her ear while stroking her back in long sweeping motions. Amelia sobbed deeply, her body shaking from the shock of the last several hours. Under Tavis's tender ministrations, her tears soon stopped, though her eyes still glistened with moisture when she finally lifted her head off of her husband's chest. "I want to go home, Tavis."

Jeremy stirred restlessly on the floor, and Tavis shifted their position slightly to place a booted foot firmly over the other man's throat. "As soon as I've taken care of him, we can go home. I promise." Gently brushing his lips across hers, she took comfort in the reassuring presence of his warm, vibrant body

A loud commotion at the door had Tavis rapidly spinning Amelia behind his back. Pointing his pistol at the door, he aimed and….

"Jesus, Tavis! It's me!" Wickes yelled when he spied Tavis with a pistol pointed at his chest. "Put the damn pistol down!"

Lowering his arm, Tavis inquired, "What took you so long?"

"Had I known you were going to storm the cottage, I would have been here sooner," he quipped dryly. "As it was, I simply sat and watched while Michelson Sr. left the house, my pistol cocked and ready. I would have fired, but I didn't know what was happening here, and I didn't want to force his hand," he said gesturing to where Meeks lay barely conscious on the ground. "I came rushing in when I heard a woman scream. I thought Amelia was in trouble."

"That was Meeks you heard. Amelia incapacitated him when he tried to rape her yet again," Tavis said proudly.

Wickes whistled softly. "You are quite a woman, Lady Stanton."

She smiled wanly, studying Tavis's elusive friend closely for the first time. Tall and broad shouldered like her husband, he shared the same blue

eyes as Tavis, but where Tavis was dark, Mr. Wickes had light-blonde hair more like her sisters. Though she couldn't put her finger on it, she felt as if she had met Mr. Wickes before. It was something about his eyes. She had a fanciful idea that if he were angry, those eyes could turn a man to stone...Gently shaking her head, she recalled herself and inclined her head towards Mr. Wickes finally acknowledging his words. "Thank you Mr. Wickes. It's nice to finally meet you."

He bowed and smiled. "It's my pleasure." Amelia couldn't be quite sure but he almost seemed relieved at her words. Surely not. She was just overly tired and reading into Mr. Wickes actions when really there was no reason to do so. After all, he was her husband's friend and had ridden all night to rescue her. It was just her overactive imagination playing tricks on her. And if a nagging doubt persisted, she was too overwrought to pay much attention to it right now.

"I imagine you would like to take your wife back home," Mr. Wickes said addressing Tavis and rousing Amelia out of her musings. "I'll deal with Meeks here, while you tend to your wife."

"Are you sure, Tom? Michelson is still out there. I would hate to leave you outnumbered."

"He'll be no problem," he said sneering at Jeremy. "I'll tie and gag him and then sit and wait for father dear to come home," Wickes said with a delightfully wicked grin on his rugged face. "We'll have a nice, long chat, he and I."

Tavis was going to argue further when he waved them off impatiently. "Go! Take care of your wife. I'll see you in a week or so after this is all straightened out."

Needing no further encouragement, Tavis wrapped his arm about Amelia's waist and escorted her out the door to take her home.

"YOU'VE been avoiding me, daughter," Lord Westby said startling Amelia out of her reverie.

In the fortnight since her abduction, Amelia had indeed avoided being in the same room with her father. At first, she was too tired and shocked from her ordeal to worry much about what she had learned of her father's activities. She spent several days healing both physically and emotionally in her chambers under the watchful care of her ever attentive husband. After that, she reasoned, her father was recovering himself, often sleeping most of the day away from heavy doses of laudanum for the pain in his shoulder. He had been insensible and unable to talk to her, or so she told herself. However, it had been several days since he had been declared well enough to leave his room and be in company.

During those times that he had enough strength to venture out into the house, Amelia was simply elsewhere. Sometimes in the garden, or the kitchen much to the annoyance of Mrs. Dowling, who had recovered remarkably quickly herself. Once when Amelia had heard him approach, she had desperately opened a door that she had never gone through before and found

herself in a closet of considerable size. That time she only waited until she had heard his footsteps pass by before swiftly exiting and repairing to a different part of the house. She realized that she couldn't hide forever, but she had hoped to avoid this confrontation for a little bit longer. Maybe until after he had left her house.

Amelia turned and regarded her father coolly before turning back to the book she had started reading upon entering the library earlier that morning. It appeared her time was up; however, that didn't mean she needed to make it easy on him. He had much to account for after all.

Lord Westby sighed and pulled up a chair near where Amelia sat pretending to read her book, for now she was too agitated and the words just swam around on the page. "You were always one to pick up a book when you had a lot on your mind. Your mother and your sisters tend to become a bit hysterical when something bad happens but not you. You take a book to a quiet spot and read until your mind can work through whatever is bothering it. I've always admired that about you, Amelia."

With a carefully crooked finger, Amelia ignored her father's words and deliberately turned the page.

"I would do that, too, when I was a boy. Take a book, so I could think. I needed to immerse myself in someone else's words until the ideas in my own head started to make sense. When you first did that, several months after you had been cursed I think it was, I found you hours later curled up on the window seat in the library, much like you are now, and I remember thinking to myself how much you were like me."

Slamming her book closed, Amelia jumped up and glared at her father, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. "I am nothing like you!" she hissed angrily. "Nothing! I would never sacrifice my home and country for money, so do not think to compare my actions to yours ever again!" She stalked off and stood in front of a large, side window, leaning her head lightly against the cool pane of glass.

"Amelia," her father began rising to follow her, "please, let me explain."

"Explain what, father?" Amelia whipped her head around rapidly and pinned her father with her hot, accusing stare. "What possible reason could you have to explain for what you did?"

"I was young, Amelia, taken in by my older, more dynamic friend. I was a quiet boy, and my only real friends were found in the pages of a book! Henry's family worked for mine so he was often about. I used to envy him how commanding he was, how all the other boys in the village looked up to him. When he took an interest in me, I was flattered. I would have done almost anything he had asked of me!"

"Bollocks!" Amelia shouted. "Don't stand there and lie to me, father! That story might have worked with mother, but credit me with having enough sense to recognize when someone is lying to me!"

Lord Westby's eyes flashed with the same fire as Amelia's. He firmed his mouth and nodded. "Fine," he said bitterly. "You want the truth? The truth is Amelia," he said advancing to where she stood until his face was looming over hers, "I was greedy and I was a coward. I knew exactly what I was doing, who I would be hurting, and I did it anyway. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

She gasped at her father's bald confession, and tears threatened to spill down her cheeks as she contemplated his beloved face now suddenly lined and old with age and grief. "You are not the man I thought you were, father," Amelia quavered. "I..I don't know if I ever knew who you really were, but I don't like this man whoever you are." She pushed past him and walked hurriedly to the door.

Before her hand had reached the knob, he called out to her. "I knew it, Amelia, and was ashamed of who I had become. That's why I found Tavis for you. He was the kind of man I knew you deserved--strong, kind, honest and brave. He is the kind of man I wish I could have been for you."

Amelia turned her head away from the door to view her father. "But you were papa," she whispered, all her suffering and heartbreak visible for him to witness. "You were that kind of man to me, and whether you had ten pounds to your name or ten thousand, I still would have loved you." She opened the door and stepped through.

"And now?" came her father's anguished question, stopping her in her tracks.

She paused. "I don't know anymore." Closing the door behind her, Amelia fled down the hallway leaving her father broken and alone.

Chapter 23

"COME in!" Tavis commanded from where he sat at his desk. He had several weeks of paperwork to catch up on after the whole incident of Amelia's abduction. Several more days were spent on helping her recover, and he finally had found some time to do some much needed work. Whatever the interruption, he fervently hoped it could wait.

"Tavis," his father-in-law said as he opened the door to his study. "I was hoping to have a word with you before I left tomorrow."

"Of course, Westby. Take a seat." Tavis gestured to an empty seat across from where he sat behind his desk. Since Westby seemed disinclined to talk, Tavis took the opportunity to continue adding sums in his ledger book. He had just finished adding one column when Westby finally broke his silence.

"I've talked to Amelia."

Tavis became instantly worried. He knew that Westby had been trying to catch Amelia alone for several days now but that Amelia had proved elusive. He also knew that what Westby had to say would be devastating to his wife, so his anxiety for her welfare was more than justified. "Oh?" he managed to ask nonchalantly. "How did she take it?"

"Badly," Westby flatly declared. "I told her the truth, which is all I can give her now. I just hope one day she will forgive me."

Wisely, Tavis remained silent. He had his own opinion about Westby, though no matter how he felt, he knew that Amelia must be feeling that much worse. Changing the subject, Tavis presented Westby with a formal document. "Here is your written confession. All you need to do is sign and you will be a free man."

Part of what was angering Tavis so much about Westby was the deal that he made with Wickes. In exchange for his full confession and testimony about Henry Michelson and his smuggling ring, Westby, who was still thought to be dead by the ever elusive Michelson, would remain deceased and exiled forever to the Americas. Tavis had strongly disagreed with that decision, preferring to let the courts mete out justice accordingly, but Wickes had overruled all of his objections saying that there would be a much better chance of catching Michelson if Westby lived, arguing that even in America, Westby could still provide useful information.

Taking the plume from Tavis, Westby signed his confession. Tavis retrieved the signed paper and carefully tucked it away in a desk drawer. Pulling out some other papers, he said, "Here are the documents you will need to board the ship to America including your new identity and several hundred pounds. That should see you through until you can establish yourself as a man of business there."

Silently, Westby took the documents and put them in the pocket of his coat. "Will Lady Anne be joining you?" Tavis inquired. Before telling Amelia, Westby had to account to his wife for all the danger he had put

Amelia into. Needless to say, she did not take his confession well.

"I don't know. She still hasn't spoken to me since I told her two days ago. I told her when I would be leaving tomorrow and that she would be welcome to join me." He shrugged half-heartedly. "I imagine I'll be sailing alone." Westby sank wearily back into his chair. Tavis simply waited.

"There's the matter of Amelia's dowry still to discuss and, oh!" Westby said hastily patting his jacket pocket, "and the papers I had on your father." Pulling out a large envelope, he laid it on Tavis's desk. "That's everything I had."

Tavis grabbed the packet and walked to the fire where he immediately placed the envelope Westby had given him in it. Breathing deeply, Tavis watched in relief as the flames licked away the last remnants of his father's stupidity.

"Before we left London, I had my solicitor draw up some papers detailing Amelia's settlement." Westby pulled out another envelope, which Tavis opened. "All of that is Amelia's."

Face set in a grim line, Tavis pushed the papers back to Westby in distaste. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not take blood money."

"It's not. My wife had a large settlement and early in our marriage, we agreed to set aside those funds to dower whatever children we had. You have my word that this money is not tainted." Westby gently pushed the papers back towards Tavis. "Please," he begged, "allow me to give this to my daughter."

Nodding warily, Tavis retrieved the papers and folded them neatly into his drawer. "Now if you'll excuse me, Lord Westby," Tavis said in obvious dismissal, "there is much yet for me to do."

Westby remained seated, though, in spite of Tavis's blatant request for the man to leave. "There is one other thing, Stanton," Westby hedged, "that I would tell you before I leave. It's about the curse."

TAVIS didn't know what to think about the news Westby had just dropped on him. He had heartily disliked the man before he knew this, but now he positively loathed the man. For a father to do that to his own children was unconscionable. Then the man had the nerve to swear him to secrecy. "What good will it do them now to know this?" he had argued. "It would only hurt them more, and they have already been hurt enough by me." Westby had broken down at that point and started to cry prompting Tavis to agree just to see the man leave his study and let him be.

He sat thinking in his study for a good half an hour after Westby left deciding whether he should share what he had just learned with his wife. After his last and final mission for the War Office, he never wanted to keep a secret from her again. It was just too difficult. In the end, he agreed with Westby's logic, though. Telling Amelia would only hurt her more, and she had been through enough. He wouldn't see her hurt anymore.

Finally rising from his desk, he left to seek out Amelia. It didn't take him too long to find her, the garden behind the kitchen having quickly become her favorite place to sit and think. There she sat on a small wooden bench, knees drawn up to her chest and red curls flying haphazardly in the wind.

Cautiously approaching lest she startle, he called her name. Turning her head to where Tavis stood, she smiled sadly and opened her arms to him. Tavis hurried over and scooped her up onto his lap. She nestled her head on his shoulder and wrapped her small hands about his neck. They sat that way for several minutes, both content to simply be with one another after the scare of thinking that they would never see each other ever again.

"I had news from Wickes," he said hesitantly.

She asked tremulously, "What did he say?"

"Jeremy is dead, killed by his own father, and in the confusion of the fight, Wickes was injured, too."

"Will he recover?"

"I should think so, but he's angry at himself for letting Michelson get away. Apparently when Wickes went down, Michelson swam out to a ship and left the harbor." What he didn't tell Amelia was that another person was in the harbor that night, a small woman with strikingly blonde hair and cool, blue eyes who fought like a soldier. She had followed Michelson and was presumably on the ship with him. Both Wickes and Tavis had an idea of who the mystery woman was, but Tavis remained quiet not wishing to further upset Amelia with his suspicions. But if he was correct, that would explain how Amelia's sister claimed to know so much about him even though they had only met once.

"Father spoke to me," Amelia said. Tavis nodded and waited for her to continue. "I think he wanted my forgiveness, Tavis, but I just couldn't' do it." She burrowed her head further into his chest, and he squeezed lightly offering what comfort he could from his embrace.

"You know I've always hated my father, Amelia," he said softly resting his chin on the top of her silky curls. "Hated him for years for abandoning me when I was a babe. But that hate didn't change anything. It didn't make my father a different person or a better man. It didn't give me the childhood I should have had. All it did was make me lonely and bitter and closed off to love." She sniffled, and he felt her rub her nose on his shirt. "The moment I finally forgave my father was the moment I realized how much I loved you. Until I let go of my anger and resentment, I wasn't free to love you as you deserved."

"You think I should forgive him?" she asked in surprise. "You think I should just forget about all the horrible things he did?"

"No, love," he said softly. "It's up to you to decide whether you forgive him or not. I would just remind you that forgiving your father, well, that's not for him." She raised her head off of his chest and studied him with confusion swimming in her green eyes.

"I don't understand."

"Forgiveness is for you, not the other person. It's when you finally let go of all the hurt and anger that has burned within you, and you allow yourself to feel love. Because as long as you feel such rage towards your father, you will always be powerless to those emotions."

Gently cupping his cheek with her hand, she searched his face for the truth of what he said. "How did you become so wise?" she finally asked.

"You taught me, my love. Everything of importance that I know is because of you."

Reaching up behind his neck, she pulled his lips down to hers in a tender kiss of love and renewal. "I love you so, Tavis," Amelia breathed wrapping her arms about his waist. "Don't ever let me go."

He hugged her closer to his chest and pressed a swift kiss to her cheek. "Never, Amelia," he promised fiercely. "I will never let you go."

THE coach pulled up to the front of the house promptly at six in the morning. Lord Westby grabbed his meager possessions and looked grimly at Tavis, the only one who showed up for his departure. Westby sighed deeply, and Tavis could tell how the absence of Lady Anne and Amelia weighed on him. Squaring his shoulders, he offered his hand to Tavis and shook it firmly. "Thank you for marrying Amelia and for protecting her when I couldn't. Please tell my wife and my daughters that...that I wish them the best," he managed to strangle out, "and that I will always love them." Tavis nodded and watched as Westby entered the carriage.

"Wait!" Amelia shouted. "Father, wait!" Tavis turned around and watched in astonishment spying the bustling form of his wife as she hurried down the stairs and across the hallway.

"Amelia?" Westby asked in amazement. Stepping down from the coach, he looked at his daughter through misty eyes full of disbelief. "What are you doing here?"

Amelia grabbed on tightly to Tavis's hands and bravely lifted her chin. "I've come to say good-bye and to tell you that you may write to me once you've reached America. I...I can't promise I will ever write back, but you may write to me."

Westby lowered his head humbly. "Thank you, daughter. I will write to you every day. You may depend on it." Bowing formally to Amelia and Tavis, Westby once again prepared to board the coach.

Impulsively Amelia leaned forward and caught her father by the hand and squeezed it tenderly. "I wish you a safe journey, father." Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears, but she smiled, a small tentative smile, at her stunned father.

Westby smiled warmly at his daughter and nodded his head rapidly, tears already gathering in his eyes. Squeezing back, he whispered, "I wish you

a good life, Amelia. Full of happiness and joy." Then turning rapidly away, he boarded the coach and with a tap to the driver was gone. Amelia stayed in the drive and watched until the coach had disappeared from sight.

"That was a good thing you did, Amelia," Tavis said coming up from behind to wrap his arm solidly about Amelia's waist. "I know how hard it was for you to forgive him."

As if they were of one mind, the two simultaneously turned and walked slowly down the path to the stables. "In spite of what he did, he is still my father, and I...I won't ever see him again." She shrugged and wiped hastily at her eyes. "I just couldn't let him go without saying good-bye."

"And your mother?" Tavis asked hesitantly, noting that she had chosen to remain behind instead of accompanying her husband to America.

"Someday maybe she'll forgive him, but not now. She's too angry at all the lies he told her over the years and at what nearly happened to me. Mother will return to London a widow and try to put the pieces of her life back together again. It's what we will all have to do."

Amelia was saddened at what her father's actions had done to her family. Forbidden to return to England, he was essentially dead to all of their known acquaintances. Her mother found herself alone for the first time in over twenty years, starting a life for herself as a widow, taking sympathies from friends and family when in reality her husband was alive only living in exile in America. What a horrible mess he had made and all because he lied. To his family, to society, to himself.

She grabbed Tavis's hand and held on tightly, allowing his strength to bolster her own flagging spirits. He squeezed back and smiled tentatively in return, and as they walked, Tavis haltingly told Amelia everything that he had been hiding from her since they met. His mission. Why he was at her house that night. Her father's blackmail. The real reason he took his horses. And finally, to reassure her that his days of secrets and spying were over.

Through it all, she listened without speaking to his story, and when she was done, she spun to face him with a suddenness that startled Tavis. Grabbing his arms fiercely, she demanded with eyes blazing a brilliant green, "Promise me that no matter what there will always be honesty between us."

Tavis shifted uneasily thinking about the big secret Lord Westby had just entrusted him with.

"Sometimes that is just not possible, Amelia," Tavis hedged. "If your father had told your mother what he was involved in, do you honestly think her knowing would have changed anything?"

She thought about that for a moment and realized he was right. Had her father told her mother anything about what he was involved in, he would have put mother in danger. She would not have met Tavis, so she would be married to Jeremy and probably severely abused, if not dead already. She shuddered at that close call.

"No," she reluctantly admitted as she came to a stop outside the stable doors. "It wouldn't have been better, but I still don't see how telling a lie would be better than answering honestly."

He knew that she would be against keeping secrets or telling little lies, and in fact, that was one of the things he admired most about her, her unflinching honesty. But maybe, he thought, he could persuade her to see it his way by offering a counterproposal. Gently pushing Amelia up against the side wall of the stable, he scattered light kisses along her neck. "What if," he asked before he took an earlobe into his mouth to suck, "we strive for honesty but acknowledge that there may be times when it is necessary for a little white lie."

Amelia busied herself with untucking Tavis's shirt from the waistband of his breeches. "When?" she demanded sucking on his lower before she nipped it with her teeth. "When would that be necessary?"

He stifled a groan when he felt his wife's small hands creep under the fabric of his shirt only to run enticingly up and down the taut skin of his stomach and lower still…. In retribution, Tavis moved his lines of kisses further south to the beckoning heat of Amelia's generous breasts. Tugging her bodice down, he pulled out a full breast and circled the tight peaks with his ready tongue. "What about," he asked between languid licks, "if you turn to me in the morning all tousled and rosy from sleep and ask me if your breath smells? You honestly want me to answer yes?"

"My breath does not smell in the morning!" she replied hotly, a flash of red staining her cheeks. Then she swatted him on the arm. "And I have never asked you that either!"

Looking up from the valley of her bosom, he popped a ripe, moist nipple out of his mouth and grinned wickedly at Amelia. "But of course, my dear. How foolish of me to suggest it."

Amelia narrowed her eyes at her husband's distraction techniques and decided to employ some of her own. Unbuttoning his breeches, she wiggled her hands down his waistband to find the hot, pulsing flesh of his manhood. Gently squeezing it, she asked innocently, "Then when you run to me in a panic because you have found some grey streaking your temples, you would rather I tell you it's merely a trick of the light?"

"I don't have any grey hair yet!" he replied indignantly, his hot breath on her breasts causing her flesh to pimple.

She soothed him by milking his shaft until he was trembling violently, and his eyes rolled back into his head. "Of course not, dear. What was I thinking?"

"You see what I mean?" Tavis questioned Amelia, once he was able to speak again. He slipped a hand under her skirts and combed his fingers provocatively through the soft hair at the apex of her thighs. "Too much honesty can lead to just as many hurt feelings as not enough."

"Are you saying that we should lie to each other?" Amelia panted as

Tavis's fingers under her skirts skillfully brought her closer and closer to her body's sweet release.

He continued to play with the plump nub of flesh between her thighs as he contemplated her breathless question. "Not lie to each other, no. Just recognize when a little lie would be more appropriate than a harsh truth." Sliding several fingers into her wet core, Amelia feverishly started to writhe against his hand that she had imprisoned between her thighs. "I will always want to protect you, Amelia, and if I know I can prevent that some way, I will do whatever it takes to see you safe."

Hiking up her skirts, Tavis grabbed a silky thigh and wrapped it around his waist. Then pulling his hard flesh from his breeches, he guided it into the slippery folds of Amelia's womanhood. Holding her tightly to him, he pumped his hips slowly in and out of Amelia's willing body. "What if," he grit out as he felt Amelia's body begin to spasm around him, "I told you that you are my heart and my soul and that I will love you forever. Would you believe me?"

Amelia's legs began to tremble as she neared release, and she clutched on tightly to the strong arms of her husband for support. "Yes, I believe you!" she sobbed. "I love you, Tavis!" Tavis reared back and slammed his full length into her clasping flesh, finally pushing her over that sharp edge of pleasure. While she peaked around him, Tavis quickly followed finding his own release in her heavenly embrace. Laying his forehead shakily against Amelia's, the two clutched at each other until their breathing eventually slowed. Placing a light, but lingering kiss on Amelia's mouth, he said, "If you can believe that, Amelia, then that's the only truth we need between us. The rest will come."

Gathering her into his arms, he walked the several feet into the stable towards an empty stall that had fresh hay and a blanket lying in a corner waiting for them. Once settled on the blanket lying in his arms with her head pressed against his chest, she thought about what Tavis had said. They did have love, and with that love came trust. She believed in him, in them, and for Amelia, that was enough.

Epilogue

6 weeks later…

"WHAT are you reading?" Amelia started at the unexpected sound of her husband's voice and turned to find him standing just over her shoulder.

"A letter from mother. She writes to say that she arrived safely in London and has decided to move in with her widowed sister." Amelia's brows furrowed and she worried her lower lip as she reread the last lines of the letter.

Tavis joined Amelia at her perch in the window seat of the library. "That's good news, so why do you look so worried?"

She waved her hands airily in front of her. "It's nothing," she smiled reassuringly while hastily tucking the paper into the folds of her skirt.

"You curse my broken, my heart, but you will never make a good liar." He reached for her hand and placed a soft kiss on it to lessen the sting of his words.

Amelia grimaced and then sighed. "Mother writes that Evie has gone to visit our uncle in Surrey."

"That's certainly nothing to worry about," Tavis commented soothingly.

"Except that Evie hates our uncle in Surrey." Amelia blew out a frustrated breath. "Plus she hates Surrey even more than our uncle."

"Is your mother worried?" Tavis asked.

"No, but she was upset that Evie didn't even inform her betrothed before leaving Town." Nibbling on her thumb, Amelia anxiously wondered why Evie would suddenly decide to leave home.

"I'm sure there is a perfectly good explanation for her sudden absence, Amelia, and that it's nothing to concern yourself about." Gently, he removed her hand from her mouth and tucked it reassuringly into his own.

Amelia smiled brightly. "You're right, Tavis. I'm just being silly." But her smile must not have reached all the way to her eyes, for he asked, "Was there more?"

"Only that Beatrice has left Town and no one quite knows where she went." Chewing her bottom lip, she asked anxiously, "Do you think something might have happened to her?"

"Wherever Beatrice is, I am sure she is capable of taking care of herself," Tavis comforted. "Besides, wasn't she the one who taught you how to defend yourself?" Amelia nodded reluctantly. "Bea will be fine. Stop worrying so much, my heart." Taking the letter from Amelia's lap, Tavis set it aside and caught both of Amelia's hands in his own. "I think I might have some news to take your mind off of your sisters."

In light of her husband's wide smile and shining eyes, Amelia pushed aside her cares and concentrated on Tavis.

"Hyacinth is breeding!"

"Oh, Tavis!" she squealed throwing her arms around his neck and squeezing tightly. "How wonderful!" Amelia knew how hard Tavis had been working this last month and a half to prepare Ballywith Stables to be a national name amongst horse enthusiasts and racers. He had spent hours writing letters to contacts he held throughout England and Scotland informing them of his venture. Within weeks, three interested parties had arrived at Ballywith and Tavis had secured much needed funding from these backers. Now that their first horse was breeding, Amelia knew that it would only be a matter of time before requests for Ballywith horses would come pouring in from all over England and Scotland.

Catching his lips with her own, Amelia kissed Tavis fiercely. "I'm so proud of you," she breathlessly said when she finally pulled back. "When will she foal do you think? In nine months like me?" she asked innocently.

"By the beginning of next August," he said excitedly rubbing his hands together, completely missing the important news Amelia had just shared. "Why do you ask? Do you want to help with the foaling?"

Amelia smiled indulgently as she took his hand and gently pressed it to her stomach. "I ask because I was hoping to be the first female since your mother to have a baby here at Ballywith, and it looks like I will be."

His eyes grew wide as comprehension dawned, and his mouth flapped around like a fish out of water before he spluttered, "You mean…you're going to…we're going to?"

With tears of happiness filling her eyes, she nodded. "He or she should arrive early spring of next year." Tavis slid down from his seat and knelt before Amelia. Wrapping his arms about his waist, he placed his head in her lap and held her. Then he leaned over and softly pressed a kiss to her gently rounded abdomen. When he looked up, his own eyes were wet and positively brimming over with emotion.

"I'm going to be a father!" he said reverently. Jumping up suddenly, he pulled Amelia into his arms. Tilting his head back, he swung Amelia around and laughed exultantly. "I'm going to be a father," he repeated. Pressing a tender kiss to Amelia's forehead, he cradled her closely to him. "Thank you, Amelia. You have given me more than I had ever dreamed possible. Every day I thank my lucky stars that you agreed to run away with me even though you knew next to nothing about me, not even my real name!"

"I should be the one thanking you," Amelia said seriously. "Before we met I was miserable, but I hid it behind a mask of cynicism and hurtful words. It wasn't until I met you, Tavis McGuire, that I saw the truth of what I had become. You were so passionate and giving that I realized I had been lying to myself all those years, thinking that I would be fine without love. When we met, I learned what it meant to finally want something for myself in spite of my curse. Your words and actions sang to me and awakened within

my soul a fierce desire to finally live my life! That's why I ran away with you, Tavis, and I have not once regretted that decision."

When he looked like he would protest, Amelia placed her forefinger gently over his mouth to quiet his protestations. "I know it still bothers you that we started our relationship with a lie, husband, but know that it was that lie which gave me wings to fly. It was that lie which finally showed me the truth."

Wrapping her arms firmly around Tavis's neck, Amelia kissed her husband sharing all the joy and brilliant happiness she had found since meeting him, knowing that he was the only truth she would ever need.

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About the Author

Sara is one of those crazy people who actually likes her chosen profession. After twelve years as an ESL teacher, she still wakes up every morning excited to go to work. Not only does she have a great job helping immigrants learn to speak English and navigate life in America, she has the opportunity to explore her other passions during the summer. She looks forward to having those three months to read, write and to spend time with her husband and two beautiful children.

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Goodreads: https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/8089076.Sara_Ackerman

If you liked Amelia's story, follow her younger sister, Evie, as she looks for a way to break her curse with the help of a certain solicitor in Silence is Golden coming in 2015! Here's a sneak peak!

Prologue

THE rain pattered harshly against the window pane in Evie's upstairs bedroom, the sound of the drops a sharp staccato in the quiet stillness of the room. Evie swung her legs absently from her perch on the window seat in her room, thoughtfully twirling her curly strands of white blonde hair between her nimble fingers while she peered out through the murky windows into the bleak June afternoon.

Evie was, she finally decided, bored out of her mind. Ever since Beatrice had disappeared weeks ago and mother and father had left for Scotland to find her older sister Amelia, who, incidentally, had caused the most delicious scandal by eloping with a stranger two months ago at *Evie's* come out ball, life at home had been so dull! There was no one to talk to besides the servants and it had been days since anyone had called on her.

Not even my betrothed, she mused with a tinge of worry. Lord Alex Newgate was a consummate gentleman—kind, solicitous and always courteous. She couldn't imagine what could be keeping him from her side as he had not yet spent more than a day away from her since their engagement was announced.

But now it had been three days since she had heard from him and she couldn't help the small edge of worry that crept into her thoughts from time to time. She really hoped that nothing had happened to cause him to regret their engagement. Evie thought she might die if she couldn't marry Lord Alex.

A swift knock on the door had her scurrying from her perch by the window to the door. Upon flinging it open, she was greeted by the cheerful face of her long time friend and maid, Camilla. "A letter for you, my lady," she curtsied, and then offered a sealed envelope to the eager Evie, who grabbed the envelope and ripped it open.

"It's from Alex," she breathed excitedly, clutching the missive to her breast. Shooing away her maid, Evie quickly repaired to the window seat and read her letter from her betrothed.

Dear Evie,

I want to apologize for failing to attend you these last three days. Each of those days away from you has been tortuous, my sweet Evelyn. Mother and father, though, have just learned of your sister's infamous elopement, and they are not pleased. They told me that they could overlook your curse because you are such a sweet, pleasing young woman, but they could not overlook your sister's scandalous elopement, no matter if the groom is the Fifth Earl of Stanton. Two scandals in one family are just too much.

Evie scanned the letter in disbelief. What was Alex telling her? His parents disapproved of her sister's elopement? They could overlook her curse? She hadn't even known that her curse had been an issue for them! With trembling fingers, Evie turned the page over to finish reading Alex's words to her.

I am sorry, Evie, but in light of the recent events that have happened

in your family, I am breaking off our engagement. Please know that I will always hold you in the highest regards.

Cordially,

Lord Newgate

The letter fluttered heedlessly to the floor from Evie's nerveless fingers, and several seconds passed in which her mind rapidly processed everything that she had just read. One nagging detail kept returning to bother her, and it wasn't until she hastily retrieved the discarded letter that she knew what.

"Cordially Lord Newgate?" Evie screamed to the empty room, finding at last the offending word that had rankled over any of the other words that appeared on that horrible letter. Cordially?? Not a week ago, he had signed his letters, *with greatest affection and love* and now he was using cordially, a word she wouldn't even use to address a distant acquaintance let alone one's betrothed.

Jumping up from her seat, she rapidly walked to the fire and threw the offending letter into it.

"Except, of course, because of your mother, we are no longer betrothed, are we Alex? Narrow minded, stupid cow," she muttered meanly to the flickering flames, wishing it was Lady Newgate's head that she was watching disappear instead of Lord Alex's letter. Though Lady Newgate claimed to not have been bothered by her curse, Evie always knew that the old bat harbored doubts about the success of a marriage in which one of the members was essentially a mute. Both Alex and Evie had reassured her that they would make a success of their marriage because they loved one another, and love conquered all. At least Evie believed it. Now she wasn't so sure about Alex. He had folded at the first sign of protest from his mother.

Then another thought struck her. Placing her hands on her hip she walked back to the fireplace and yelled at the last remnants of the burning paper, "What does he mean anyway that his parents just learned of the elopement? Everyone has known about that for positively ages!"

Once her sister Amelia had run away, it wasn't long before the real story behind her disappearance surfaced for all of London to gossip about. While some had called it scandalous and made a point to ignore her or her family when out in society, Evie could have cared less what the ton thought. She was delighted for her sister and any happiness she had found, for Evie knew all too well the difficulties her sister had faced because of her curse over the years, had in fact experienced many of the same problems herself. When she had gone to Alex and laughingly told him the astonishing news of Amelia's elopement, he had laughed with her, saying that it couldn't have happened to a better person. Evie had been concerned about his parent's reaction to the news, but he had assured her that it wouldn't change a thing between them.

Evie snorted ruefully. But except it had, which meant that either Lord Alex or his parents (or both, she thought angrily) needed a way to break off

the engagement, and using her sister's elopement was all the excuse they needed. Of course that begged the question, who did they want for Alex instead of her? She narrowed her eyes at the unhappy thought that crept into her head. *Or who did he want for himself?*

Her small frame visibly vibrated with her barely controlled emotions, so she began pacing about the room, hoping to dispel some of her nervous energy, but the faster she walked, the more agitated her mind became. Finally, she threw herself onto her bed and flopped onto her back. Staring up at her canopied bed, Evie desperately tried to still her racing thoughts. As it often did when thoughts crowded her mind and words overlapped until there was nothing more than a string of letters piled into the dark recesses of her mind, the haunting song of the Gypsy's curse wove its way through the muddle in her mind, instantly soothing her.

Be still, little Evie, and dry your pretty eyes.

Quiet, precious girl. There's no need to cry.

Hush little Evie. Don't say another word.

Silent, now, Evie. Never more will you be heard.

It had been so long ago since she had heard those words, spoken so gently to her by the Gypsy woman in the clearing that sometimes she could almost imagine that it was all a dream, but then she would remember her parents' distraught faces begging her to speak and the feeling of panic when she had been unable to do so. Then she knew it wasn't a dream, and the words that had at first soothed her into calmness suddenly grew larger, overwhelming her senses and lodging firmly in her throat until no sound could escape past the terrifying obstruction of those words.

Not being able to speak aloud in front of others had its disadvantages. She had to wait to be noticed or when to be spoken to. She couldn't just blurt out her thoughts or share in gossip with other young ladies of her acquaintance. Always she had to wait until others had time to read what she had to say, or until visitors left for her to be included in the conversation. Evie hated it. What's more, she hated waiting for others when she was ready now! Ready to see, to do, to go!

She twitched in irritation on the bed and realized that her calming routine was not doing its job! Hush, Evie, hush, she repeated, training her scattered musings onto that one phrase, that one phrase that had become like a mantra to her over the years. So often had she repeated them that they filtered through her mind like the trickle of a stream in a silent forest. Always there running in a loop in the back of her mind, it allowed her to sort and compartmentalize words and events, so she could focus on what was important.

Just like that, she was back. "My betrothal," she announced to no one in particular, having finally come to a realization about what needed to be done. "I need to make Alex see that ours is still a good match and to do that…" she trailed off having all of a sudden chosen a course of action.

Shaking her head firmly in resolution, Evie jumped off the bed and rummaged through her dressing room storage until she found her luggage. There was nothing that could be done about her sister's elopement, she decided as she began to pack sturdy traveling clothes into her baggage, but there was something that could be done about her curse.

Evelyn Grace Westby was done waiting.

IT had been almost two hours and still Alfred T. Coombes, solicitor to the Fifth Earl of Stanton, sat unattended, waiting for the elusive Lord Westby to receive him. He sighed heavily and pulled out his pocket watch to check the hour for what felt like the hundredth time since the Westby's aging and decrepit butler had shown him into this impossibly small and incredibly ugly front parlor.

Unfortunately, Alfred was all too used to being shoved away in tiny, out of the way rooms while waiting for *Someone* to appear. While everyone liked money, no one wanted to deal with the day-to-day monotony that came with managing an estate, and since that was his job, he was all too often treated like an annoying relative—welcome, but with barely concealed irritation.

How he wished for a job that allowed him to set his own schedule so he could do what he wanted instead of being subjected to the whims of his employer, Lord Tavis McGuire, Earl of Stanton, a temperamental former soldier now turned Earl. Though his disposition had improved slightly upon marriage to Lady Stanton, he still barked out orders like the captain he was trained to be. Out of the blue, Lord Stanton had told Alfred to pack his bags and to travel to London to wait upon Lord Westby. Once in London, he was to finalize a marriage settlement between the Earl of Stanton and his new wife, Lord Westby's middle daughter, Lady Amelia Stanton, née Westby. Alfred did not like being ordered about even if his employer had sent him to London, somewhere he had been longing to go for years. He objected purely on principle. One man should not be able to order another about like that.

Furthermore, he fumed internally as he glanced at his pocket watch yet again, *one man should not make another wait for more than two hours!* Angrily, he yanked on his neck tie—somehow he always managed to tie the damn things too tightly—and began to briskly pace the small confines of the room.

It was one thing Alfred hated, it was waiting. Idle time meant wasted time in his opinion, had always thought so since he had been a small child. His father, a natural born philosopher and veritable soul of patience, had cautioned Alfred over the years telling him that an impatient man is one who will never fully comprehend the majesty and wonders of the Universe. Alfred had always thought that his father had been a little silly, worrying about the marvels of the world when he was a mere solicitor, (Alfred having always thought that numbers and ledgers to be a bit dry and boring himself) but his father had insisted that a man needed to feed the soul from the beauty of the world as much as he needed to fill his belly from the fruits of his labor.

Alfred remembered laughing at his father, telling him, "What good does it do to smell the flowers when you have to pay for the pleasure in the

first place? By applying myself industriously, I can make enough money to buy a whole greenhouse and smell the flowers whenever I want!"

His father had shaken his head sadly at his son's declaration. "You may gain wealth beyond measure, but I wonder, son, what will you lose along the way?" His father had looked old in that moment, Alfred recalled, stooped over from age and a lifetime of sitting over a desk peering at ledgers, but he had left without a word, leaving Alfred riding high on the exuberance and arrogance of youth, so sure in the knowledge that he was right.

Two weeks later as he prepared to depart for an exciting career in shipping on the sugar plantations of Jamaica, his father unexpectedly died. Alfred quickly went from a confident, carefree young man to the serious head of the household once it became apparent that if his mother and younger siblings were to survive, he would need to take over his father's place as solicitor.

That had been five years ago, and every day that Alfred spent his days working for someone else, another small piece of his soul shriveled up and died. Pretty soon, there would be nothing left for him to lose. It was moments like this when his father's words came back to haunt him. Since that conversation with his father all those years ago, he had lost everything—his father, his chance at success as a self-made man, his youth—and what did he have to show for it? He was twenty- five years old, almost twenty-six, and from the day that his father died, he had not had a moment to himself. If he weren't caring for his mother and remaining younger siblings, he worked day and night ensuring the solvency and success of other men's properties. It angered him, and if he were honest with himself, it made him intensely jealous, to work so hard and not to reap the benefits of his efforts.

It wasn't as if Alfred's dreams were as lofty as they had been when he had been younger. Once, maybe, he would have dared to dream so high, to reach for the stars, but years of responsibility and hard work had taken away any shred of optimism or hope he may have harbored for himself. Now, he simply wished for a home of his own, maybe a wife and a couple of children, though he was reluctant to admit to even that, so afraid he was of wishing for more than what he deserved.

No, Alfred had resolved all those years ago when his mother had tearfully informed him that without his father's income she and the children would be destitute that he would do whatever it took to ensure the well-being of his family, even if it meant sacrificing his own desires. Most of the time, Alfred never regretted his decision, content to shove aside all of his dreams and aspirations for his own life in light of his family's obvious need. Over the years, he had numbed himself to the daily drudgery of adding and subtracting columns of numbers until he no longer remembered a time before he was a solicitor.

And if there was a small part of Alfred's soul that retained the memory of a bright, carefree boy eager for adventure out in the world, well, he ruthlessly shoved it into a dark, dark, place in his psyche. One day soon it would disappear completely and with it the remaining dreams of that young man would finally die, leaving in its place a lonely, bitter man with no dreams left to live.

Shaking his head firmly to dispel the gloomy thoughts that had overtaken his idle mind, he said out loud to no one in particular, “I hate waiting!” With those words resounding throughout the empty room, Alfred finally knew. He knew that he could no longer wait while others dictated his life. He could no longer stand by and watch other men get rich off of his hard work. His mother and two youngest siblings would get by. After all, hadn’t he been saving every pound he earned since he had started working for his father’s partner all those years ago?

Firming his jaw lest he lose his sudden burst of confidence and newfound resolve, Alfred straightened his jacket and strode purposefully out of that cramped receiving room, through the front door and on to the bustling streets of London.

Alfred T. Coombes was done waiting.